

THE CREATION OF SLAVE CHRISTIANITY IN VIRGINIA, 1770-1850

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a broad examination of black Baptist cultures within biracial churches in Virginia from the American Revolution until 1850, a time of intense growth in slave Christianity. When slaves converted in Virginia, most converted in, and became members of, biracial churches. These churches created new relationships between whites and blacks. The dissertation follows the efforts of black Baptists to construct their faith and their relationships within the constraints of churches that were controlled by their white male membership. My research reveals a fuller picture of biracial Baptist communities than scholars have previously constructed. Most slave members of Baptist churches were not owned by the whites in their churches. In addition, whites and slaves in Baptist churches usually did not live in the same places. Slaves were more likely to reside on larger plantations and whites to live on smaller farms. Slaves and whites in biracial churches were linked by complex geographic and social ties that cut across the boundaries of farms and plantations.

Biracial churches could be sites of conflicts between white leaders and slaves who covertly resisted their efforts to use churches as methods of social control. They were also, however, the sites of conflicts among slaves over the meaning of conversion to evangelical Christianity. The dissertation brings to light the conflicts in slave communities caused by the growth of Christianity, involving issues such as marriage, divorce, and alcohol use. This project relies heavily on case studies of particular churches that illustrate broad themes, supplemented by chapters that use data drawn from diverse areas to explore particular dynamics. Baptist slaves did not passively accept Baptist fellowship and worship. Blacks began to join Baptist churches in significant numbers at

the same time as the church brought in many white converts. In this period of growth, slaves dramatically influenced Baptist worship. At the same time, they constructed a distinct form of Baptist Christianity. The dissertation concludes by looking at the black leaders of biracial churches who carved out their careers by acting as intermediaries between the white men who controlled biracial churches and slave members of these churches.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a broad examination of black Baptist cultures within biracial churches in Virginia from the American Revolution until 1850, a time of intense growth in slave Christianity. When slaves converted to Christianity in Virginia, most converted in, and became members of, biracial churches. These churches created new relationships between whites and blacks. Masters and slaves rarely worshipped in the same churches. Instead, slaves and whites in biracial churches were linked by complex geographic and social ties that cut across the boundaries of farms and plantations. The dissertation follows the efforts of black Baptists to construct their faith within the constraints of churches that were controlled by their white male membership.

Very few slaves were Christian until the last decades of the 18th century. Yet, by the time of the Civil War, Christianity had established a firm foothold among slaves and free blacks throughout the United States. Despite the enormity of this transformation, we actually know very little about it. To put the problem in its most basic form, scholars have done little to understand who Christian slaves were. To answer this question, we need to look at relationships between Christian and non-Christian slaves, as well as the conflicts and connections between Christian slaves and their white co-religionists. Particularly crucial to examine are the ways that these relationships changed with the enormous growth of slave Christianity over the period.

Biracial churches could be sites of conflicts between white leaders and slaves who covertly resisted their efforts to use churches as methods of social control. They were also, however, the sites of conflicts among slaves over the meaning of conversion to evangelical Christianity. The dissertation brings to light these conflicts in slave

communities caused by the growth of Christianity, involving issues such as marriage, divorce, and alcohol use. The formation of a Christian slave culture in Virginia has broad relevance because of the widespread sale of slaves from the state to areas south and west. Virginia slaves who were forcibly removed from their homes brought brands of evangelical Christianity forged in Virginia with them to these regions.¹

This project relies heavily on case studies of particular churches that illustrate broad themes, supplemented by chapters that use data drawn from diverse areas to explore particular dynamics. The first chapter of the dissertation uses the biography and writings of Frederick Douglass to introduce the theme of conflicts between slaves over the meaning and value of biracial Christian worship in the context of slavery, as well as to introduce the long historiography of slave Christianity, which has examined and often concealed these conflicts. The second chapter gives two close studies of individual churches, using census records to construct a geographic and social picture of both slave and white membership. The third chapter moves outward, to explore how disciplinary records at a number of Virginia churches reveal both the efforts of white leaders to

¹ Numerous academic works examine evangelicalism in Virginia, and the South more broadly as well as the relationship between evangelicalism and slavery. For broad treatments of southern evangelicalism see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998), Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For works looking specifically at religion and slavery see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Eugene D Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll; the World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) which treats slave religion within a much broader framework but remains highly influential. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) is the most recent broad treatment. For specific examinations of slavery and religion in Virginia see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, University of North Carolina Press, 1982). On Virginia Baptists see Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginian's Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2008). For specific examinations of the dynamics of biracial churches in Virginia in the nineteenth century, see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008) and Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

control slaves, as well as conflicts within Christian slave communities. The fourth chapter then looks more closely at the predicament of the black leadership of biracial churches, examining the role of black deacons in the First Baptist Church of Richmond. I have chosen to use case studies extensively because Baptist churches were primarily local institutions whose local character is important to understanding them. Baptist churches were community institutions with only loose and voluntary ties to other churches. As a result, Baptist records allow a detailed examination of interactions within churches without having to account for a layer of episcopal church government.

Slavery and Religion in mid-18th Century Virginia

Christianity had little purchase among Virginia slaves until the second half of the eighteenth century. The earliest slaves to come to Virginia may actually have been Christians. Most of the slaves who can be identified after the first cargo of slaves arrived in the colony in 1619 had Christian names, usually Spanish ones, that probably indicated that they had been baptized before being taken to Virginia.² While the Christian names suggest they had been baptized, we do not know a great deal about the religious belief or adherence of these early Virginia slaves.

The character of slavery in Virginia changed dramatically in the eighteenth century. Several factors led to the importation to Virginia of a large number of slaves in the 1730s, and growth accelerated thereafter. The tobacco economy of Virginia expanded rapidly in the early part of the century. At the same time, economic and social conditions in England resulted in a loss of much of the indentured labor that had previously been

² Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Berlin describes this “generation” of slaves as Atlantic Creoles—a term I have not adopted here.

available. As a result, tobacco planters began to buy large numbers of slaves.³ Previously, Virginia had been far outside of normal slave trading routes. Consequently, any slaves who ended up in Virginia were likely to have gotten there by circuitous routes, explaining the preponderance of slaves relatively acculturated to creole society. As more slaves were brought to Virginia, however, slave ships incorporated the colony more directly into their trading routes. The slaves who came to Virginia in the early eighteenth century, therefore, were often brought directly from Africa or made only brief stopovers in other colonies.⁴ These slaves generally spoke no English, were not Christian, and were initially profoundly alienated from the European cultural world of Virginia.

We know very little about the religious lives of these slaves. John Butler has argued that the transatlantic journey “shattered” the religious world of these slaves resulting in a “spiritual holocaust.”⁵ Butler relies on an overly rigid notion of African religions to construct his thesis that African religious systems could not survive the transatlantic passage as systems. As scholars have demonstrated, he dramatically underestimates the flexibility of human belief and human ability to construct syncretic religions.⁶ Most importantly, though, Butler assumes a great deal from extremely limited

³ On Colonial Virginia and slavery, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1995), Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), Lorena Seebach Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

⁴ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 58–60.

⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 129–63.

⁶ See Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, University of North Carolina Press, 1998 and James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. See Michael Angelo Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and James Hoke Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in*

evidence. Slaves, themselves, left virtually no records of this period, and white Virginians were generally uninterested in the lives of slaves outside of their labor.

Some scholars have been able to do impressive work putting together the limited evidence that does exist. As Phillip Morgan has argued, Africans came to America with diverse religious beliefs. However, some commonalities can be observed. A great deal of evidence points to slave beliefs in magic, sorcery, and poisoning. As Morgan argues, trying to disentangle the mystical and religious from more modern ideas of sickness in poisonings and healings is essentially anachronistic.⁷ This can be seen particularly clearly in cases where poison was administered not to harm but to achieve some effect as in a case involving a slave in Louisa County, Virginia, who was acquitted on the charge of poisoning because the court believed her testimony that she had administered a poison “to keep peace in the family, and to make her master kind to her.” Another slave in Prince Edward County put seeds into food “for the purpose of making her mistress love her.”⁸ These cases show that Virginia slaves’ ideas of poisoning involved much more than simply putting noxious substances into food to harm.

Our knowledge of other slave religious practices is much more limited. Much evidence, both archeological and testimonial, points to regularized burial practices among slaves. Slave funerals were large gatherings in mid-eighteenth century Virginia, almost always involving alcohol.⁹ A traveler to the Chesapeake area in the early nineteenth century reported that slaves “drink the dead to a new home, which some believe to be in

the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003) for treatments of creolization and syncretism in the United States and Brazil, respectively.

⁷ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 629.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 624.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 640–41.

old Guinea.”¹⁰ As the quote indicates, slave burial rituals seem to have been connected to a belief in life after death, often linked to a return to Africa. Archeological evidence shows that slaves were buried with various grave goods, such as pipes or necklaces.¹¹

Many Virginia slaves in the eighteenth century also seem to have believed in a supreme god, as Morgan shows. One missionary reported from his conversations with slaves that they believed in a “god that absolutely disposes of all things.”¹² These beliefs might have had African roots. Certainly many missionaries to Africa reported a belief among the people they encountered in a supreme being of some sort.¹³ These beliefs, as Morgan suggests, might have developed through contact with Christianity. We should beware of seeing too much continuity between African practices and the practices of slaves in Virginia, but it does seem clear that slaves had a variety of religious practices, some of which were based on a belief in an all-powerful god.

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, the barriers to slaves becoming Christian were immense. Initially, not all white Virginians were convinced that Christian slavery was even possible. Early modern European theories of slavery stressed that Europeans should not enslave other Christians. Slave owners who believed that slaves who converted to Christianity would become free were unlikely to proselytize their slaves or allow others to do so. Aware of the problem, clerics increasingly insisted that there was nothing inconsistent about Christianity and slavery. In 1667 the House of Burgesses passed a law stating that slaves who became Christians would remain slaves, but many slaveowners, and crucially, some slaves as well, seem to have continued to believe that

¹⁰ Ibid., 641.

¹¹ Ibid., 642.

¹² Ibid., 632.

¹³ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 10.

conversion would mean freedom not only of spirit, but also of body.¹⁴ In an influential sermon delivered to the London conference of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, a society founded to convert slaves and native Americans, William Fleetwood, an Anglican Bishop was at pains to make clear that the “Liberty of Christianity is entirely spiritual,” and conversion “left men under all of the Obligations and Engagements that it found them with respect to *Liberty or Bondage*.”¹⁵ Fleetwood was so careful to reiterate this point because he, and other members of the SPG were concerned that not only whites, but slaves as well might be inclined to equate the gospel with freedom. In 1730, Virginia whites believed that they had barely prevented a slave rebellion, triggered by rumors among slaves that the King of England had freed all Christian slaves.¹⁶ Although the ensuing insurrection panic was likely based on little besides the fears of whites, the stories of rumors among slaves linking Christianity to freedom may have been real. Certainly, those who did try to convert slaves frequently found slaveowners who were hostile to their efforts.¹⁷ Adam Dickey, an Anglican priest in Virginia, reported that he had upset planters in his parish with “an over active Zeal in Instructing And Baptizing Negroe Slaves.”¹⁸ Even many of those who were convinced that conversion to Christianity would not free slaves were still concerned that it would be disruptive. As one clergyman put it “some allege it makes them prouder, and inspires them with thoughts of freedom.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 47, Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 133, Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 28.

¹⁵ Quoted in Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 138.

¹⁶ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 28. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 32.

¹⁷ See Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 27–28.

¹⁸ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 422.

¹⁹ James Blair to Bishop of London, 20 July 1730, cited in Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 27.

Anglican church structures were not well suited to convert large numbers of slaves, even without such opposition from planters. The Anglican establishment was fairly strong in many areas of Virginia by the eighteenth century. The system broke down in the less settled regions, where the episcopal structure was unable to cope with widely dispersed settlements, rapidly growing populations, and too few clergy in the decades before the American Revolution.²⁰ Anglicans showed little sustained interest in converting slaves, partly because those who did faced trouble from parishioners.²¹ While the Church of England may have provided adequate support for many white members by the end of the colonial period, its sporadic efforts to convert enslaved black members largely resulted in failure.

Other factors besides the indifference of much of the Anglican establishment made conversion of slaves before the middle of the eighteenth century rare. Most Virginia slaves in this period might live in close proximity with whites, but they were often far apart culturally. Their interactions with European culture did not incline them to adopt many of its cultural practices or ideas. Anglicanism, as it was practiced in Virginia, may have also had limited appeal to slaves on its own merits. The practice of Anglicanism, while varied, was centered on rituals that emphasized the established order of the community.²² Historians have sometimes been overly eager to explain the attraction of slaves to evangelical religion as the result of an affinity between evangelical practices and African religions or as more appealing to slaves because of their supposed emotionalism. However, we do not have to resort to such tendentious explanations to see

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 422.

²² Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 38–40.

how Anglican religious practices emphasizing existing community hierarchies and the power of established ritual failed to appeal to slaves who were excluded by the social hierarchies they represented. Charles Ball reported in his slave narrative that his grandfather believed in a god who he frequently prayed to. This might have made his grandfather seem an ideal candidate for conversion. However, Ball wrote that his grandfather thought Christianity was “altogether false, and indeed no religion at all.”²³ Ball’s grandfather seems to have viewed Christianity as an alien religion, the religion of his masters rather than one he could relate to or respect, despite the commonalities between it and his personal beliefs. Until the rise of evangelicalism, most slaves would continue to view Christianity as a religion that they could not, and did not wish to, relate to.

Early Evangelical Inroads

Anglicanism was the dominant form of Christianity in Virginia from the founding of the colony, but it always had some challengers. Isolated groups of dissident Christian groups were present nearly from the beginning. However, in the 1740s evangelical forms of Christian practice began to make significant inroads. In the western counties, Scotch Irish settlers brought Presbyterianism with them in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Out of this Presbyterian tradition came the first Virginia evangelical revival, as well as the first large scale conversions of slaves to Christianity in Virginia.

Defining what made these evangelicals distinctive is an important, but complicated task for historians. “Evangelical” does not describe a specific theology. The

²³ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 634.

historian of British evangelicalism, David Bebbington, constructed a framework in which evangelicalism could be understood as being composed of four “qualities” or “priorities”: the belief in the centrality of personal conversion; “the expression of the gospel in effort”, or converting others; “a particular regard for the Bible”; and a “stress” on Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross.²⁴ Bebbington’s definition has the benefit of conciseness and broad coverage and is the one I have adopted. His rubric rightly places emphasis on an evangelical concern with a personal relationship with Jesus, which is crucial to understanding the nature of evangelical belief and worship.

The first evangelical movement in Virginia arose around the middle of the eighteenth century and featured a small but notable number of slaves among its converts. In 1748, a Presbyterian evangelical minister named Samuel Davies arrived in Hanover County, Virginia. Davies set up in the county as a minister to four churches.²⁵ His presence led to the first evangelical revivals in Virginia. In 1751, Davies noted that he had baptized forty slaves in the three years since he had come to Hanover. In the next four years, he reported that he baptized a further sixty slaves. In 1857, Davies’ efforts bore even more fruit, 157 slaves converted in that year alone.²⁶ While the numbers were not large by the standards of later revivals, they represented the first wide scale conversions of slaves to Christianity in Virginia.

Early evangelical preachers, such as Davies, welcomed slaves because they believed that the conversion of slaves was a particularly poignant sign of God’s grace and

²⁴ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2–3.

²⁵ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 25.

²⁶ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 426.

the universality of Christ' sacrifice.²⁷ A eulogist to Lewis Lunford, an early Baptist preacher, wrote, "To win one soul to Christ, if eve' an old decrepit negro slave, was a pearl of greater price to him, 'than the rich gems of polish'd gold/the sons of Aaron wore.'" ²⁸ Charles Irons convincingly argues that Baptists wished to demonstrate to poorer whites their belief in spiritual equality by ministering to the lowest in Virginia society: slaves. Furthermore, as Irons argues, by converting slaves, evangelicals were able to dramatize the failure of the Anglican establishment to reach blacks in Virginia. Davies, for example, wrote of "neglected *Heathen Slaves* in this Christian colony," in a subtle rebuke of Anglicans.²⁹ That made the conversion of even relatively small numbers of slaves a powerful propaganda tool for evangelicals.

Explaining the success of Davies among slaves is difficult. Although some planters believed that converted slaves would question their enslavement, Davies was explicit in his support of slavery and rejection of any attempts to link Christianity with earthly freedom.³⁰ Conversion under Davies did offer one clear tangible benefit to slaves, however. Davies believed that converts must be able to read the Bible and accordingly taught slaves to read after Baptism.³¹ Certainly, this might have appealed to some slaves. Some historians have argued, less convincingly, that evangelical worship drew slaves "because it may have resonated more strongly with their previous African religious practices."³² By their very nature, however, these claims are unsupportable. Generally the

²⁷ See Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 54, Donald Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

²⁸ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 37.

³⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 427.

³¹ Ibid., Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 73.

³² Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 72.

evidence historians have used to buttress these claims emphasizes the role of singing or physical displays of emotion.³³ Combining religious worship with either singing or bodily movement, however, was hardly unique to regions of West Africa, and of course, Anglicans also sang psalms. Looking for superficial resemblances between evangelicalism and a diverse set of West African religious practices does not have much explanatory power if what we want to know is why slaves were attracted to particular evangelical churches.

Some aspects of evangelicalism may have appealed specifically to slaves, but it is equally profitable to think about the commonalities between whites and slaves that allowed the evangelical message to reach both groups. Demographic and social changes among Virginia slaves resulted in an increasingly creole, that is Virginia-born, slave population. Slave importations continued to rise in the colony reaching a peak in the 1730s when almost 13,000 imported slaves were added to a population of about 40,000 in 1730.³⁴ However, at the same time, the slave population in Virginia was increasing naturally. The effects of this growth were blunted by the large importation of slaves, which accounted for more of the increase in the 1730s, and 1740s, but by about 1750 a majority of the growth in the Virginia slave population was as a result of natural increase, rather than importation. The annual rate of natural increase reached three percent in the 1730s and rose to almost five percent by the 1740s.³⁵ The result of this high birthrate was that the slave population of Virginia became less African-born: in 1710 the slave population was fifty-two percent African-born, by 1740 it had fallen to thirty-four percent

³³ For a well-constructed version of this approach see Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion* and Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-century Virginia* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989).

³⁴ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61, 81.

³⁵ Ibid., 81–84.

and by 1750 to twenty-two percent.³⁶ Thus, Davies was preaching to a population of slaves who were more acculturated to Virginia society, even if we do not know the exact demographic makeup of those whom he converted.

What would have attracted these native Virginian slaves to evangelical Christianity? The answer may be quite similar to that for the white men and women who converted, and just as difficult to fully grasp. Slaves, of course, inhabited different worlds than whites and thus the experience and effect of evangelical movements upon slaves was quite different, but we do not necessarily need to look for particular sources of special appeal. Historians of evangelicalism have long assumed that evangelical religion appealed to slaves and whites of lower status because of its message of spiritual equality. Jewel Spangler's research has pointed out that the social statuses of evangelicals were far more diverse than previously acknowledged and has warned against viewing evangelicals as enemies of hierarchy.³⁷ However, it may be important to look at the ways evangelical churches allowed both slaves and whites from a variety of backgrounds to form particular communities that addressed both spiritual and social needs.

Ultimately, blacks who found appeal in evangelicalism often may have done so for somewhat similar reasons as whites. In this dissertation I show that many of the factors which made evangelicalism appealing to whites were, in fact, even more potent among slaves. Slaves lived in a rapidly changing world like white Virginians but had far fewer levers for controlling it. Large-scale migration throughout the early part of the 19th century took white Virginians far from their homes and families. Those who stayed may have felt the sense of dislocation as keenly as those who left—with uncertain prospects of

³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 119–66.

ever seeing migrants again. Slaves had to cope with separations that were often far more traumatic. Slaves in Virginia were frequently sold away from the state, suddenly and with little notice, to lands far away. In their case, return was almost an impossibility.

Evangelicalism offered to these slaves, as well as whites, a cosmic family that offered community in the present and the hope of reunion in the afterlife. This family was not independent but under the protection of a god who was concerned about each individual within the community. This belief allowed both slaves and whites spiritual protection against the unpredictable world around them in which life was often short and death ever present.

Evangelicals were successful at converting slaves receptive to their message for the simple reason that they made efforts to do so. As we saw, evangelicals partially were interested in converting slaves for propaganda purposes, but regardless of their motives, they spent a great deal of time and energy attempting to reach slaves. Furthermore, as Irons argues, they were receptive to slave preferences, tailoring their services to meet slaves' needs, whether that be Sunday schools that taught reading or an expanded role for singing in services.³⁸ Probably more important than any of these innovations was what they signaled to enslaved Virginians: evangelicals were interested in their spiritual welfare, and the church was open to them. Baptist slaves were already predisposed to listen to the message they heard within evangelical churches.

Baptist Churches in Mid-Eighteenth Century Virginia

³⁸ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 36–37.

Although Presbyterians made the first evangelical conversions in Virginia, they were soon superseded by other groups with superior organizational mechanisms for rapid conversion. Presbyterians insisted on a highly educated clergy with formal training. It was difficult for them to keep up with the demand for ministers in the rapidly growing piedmont areas of Virginia. Two other denominations, Baptists and Methodists, were far more successful, although their structures were as different from each other as from that of the Presbyterians.

Methodism started as a reform movement within the Anglican Church. John Wesley, influenced by the Moravians, a pietist German sect, preached on the importance of personal conversion. While attempting to operate within the Anglican Church, he authorized missionaries to America, and after the Revolution approved the foundation of American Methodism as a distinct denomination. In time, Methodism would grow to become the main rival to the Baptists in Virginia and throughout the southern United States. Methodism relied on itinerant preachers to convert members and minister to those already converted. These itinerants, mostly young men, traveled large circuits and braved poor roads and the hostility of many of those they hoped to convert. Compared to Presbyterians, Methodist itinerants underwent only minimal training and could thus be quickly recruited and sent out to preach and minister. The itinerant structure allowed Methodists to cover more sparsely populated areas than their rivals since a resident minister was unnecessary, yet believers were still held together by a church hierarchy. John Wesley famously split from George Whitfield on the question of predestination and

Methodists were firmly against the doctrine, a position that distinguished them from other evangelical groups who were mainly Calvinist.³⁹

The origins of the Baptist movement can be traced to 1612 in Britain. Baptists were part of the larger English separatist movement. As their name suggests, Baptists distinguished themselves from the other groups in the English dissenting tradition by their belief in the importance of adult rather than infant baptism. This practice earned them the name Baptists, derived from the Anabaptists, a reformation era sect in continental Europe.⁴⁰ Baptists' rejection of infant baptism marked them as among the most radical of the dissenting groups, since they denied that the church could, or should, be a universal community. They were persecuted accordingly, although much of this persecution ended after the Restoration in England. Baptists had immigrated to America in the 17th century, particularly to Pennsylvania because it provided religious liberty.

The first Baptists to arrive in Virginia were probably two missionaries sent by an Arminian association of English Baptists in 1714.⁴¹ However, the primary source of Baptist incursions into Virginia was from Pennsylvania, where Baptists had established the Philadelphia Conference in 1742 with a Calvinist confession of faith. Virginia Baptists, lacking clergy, wrote to the Pennsylvania Conference in the 1750s asking them to supply them with ministers. The Pennsylvania Baptists agreed on the condition that these churches adopt Calvinism. The bulk of Virginia Baptists, and all of those studied in this dissertation, were Calvinists from this point forward, marking them as distinct from

³⁹ On Methodist itinerants see Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 77–116 and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 81–92.

⁴⁰ The precise religious origins of English Baptists are somewhat murky. They were probably somewhat influenced by similar groups operating in the Netherlands, but the relationship is unclear. See Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

the Arminian Methodists, although small groups of “Freewill Baptists” remained in existence.

Baptist church organization was based on church autonomy. Each Baptist church functioned as an individual unit, governed by its white male membership. All connections beyond the individual church were strictly voluntary. Baptist churches did belong to associations, which were simply loose groupings of churches. Once a year, member churches sent delegates to these associations, usually with a letter approved by the congregation containing membership statistics and describing the progress of the church in that year. These delegates might also occasionally take queries on difficult points of doctrine or church governance. The church was under no obligation, however, to take any advice it received. Early Baptists in Virginia were divided into several groups differing on various questions of doctrine and worship style. One division was between General Baptists—the descendants of the Free Will Baptists established by the English missionaries sent in 1714—and Particular Baptists. General Baptists held that salvation was open to all who wished to receive it (that is, “general”), while Regular Baptists, who named themselves thus to emphasize their doctrinal conformity to Calvinist beliefs, held that salvation was reserved for a predetermined elect.

General Baptists were never very numerous in Virginia and were substantially outnumbered by the Regulars by the latter decades of the 18th century. The Regulars were themselves divided. Separate Baptists developed largely from the tumult of the First Great Awakening in New England. Baptists, who under the influence of George Whitfield and his disciples, embraced more evangelical forms of worship and proselytizing, began to call themselves separates and were joined by some

Congregationalist churches. These groups moved into Virginia along with several charismatic preachers, most notably Shubal Stearns, in the 1750s. General Baptists themselves became more evangelical in the latter half of the 18th century and the distinctions between the two groups, as Jewel Spangler has argued, were not often clear. The Separate Baptists would join with the Regular Baptists to form a unified Virginia Baptist Association in 1787.⁴²

Baptist congregational autonomy made all such disputes peripheral to the vital questions of Baptist worship, membership, and community, which were decided at the congregational level by white male church members, usually at what were called quarterly meetings, generally held at least once a month. The role of slaves and free blacks in these meetings was complicated. As I will explore in chapters three and four of the dissertation, black men were generally excluded from decisions of church governance, but often had some say in decision-making involving matters of church discipline.

The Expansion of Biracial Baptist Churches, 1770-1850

Slaves joined Baptist churches from their establishment in Virginia, although not initially in large numbers relative to their population. The position of Baptists, as well as Methodists and Presbyterians, changed dramatically in Virginia after the American Revolution. There are no reliable estimates before 1790 but by that date, there were probably about 9,500 black members of Baptist churches in the state. This made black Baptist church members about six percent of the total Virginia slave population fourteen

⁴² Ibid., 82–83.

years of age and over.⁴³ This number would grow dramatically in the decades to come. Baptists were disproportionately successful in recruiting black members in Virginia during this period. In 1790, one historian estimates that there were 5,926 black Baptists, 3,427 black Methodists, and negligible numbers of Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Starting in the early 1810s, a series of revivals resulted in large numbers of new Baptist converts, both black and white. These revivals corresponded with a national movement known as the second great awakening.⁴⁴ By 1850, there were 44,832 Baptists and 9,963 Methodists, with only a few hundred Presbyterians and less than a hundred black Episcopalians.⁴⁵ According to these data, by 1850 about sixteen and a half percent of black Virginians fourteen and over were members of a Baptist church. Black Baptists actually slightly outnumbered white Baptists and far eclipsed them in terms of the percentage of Baptists in the total population. There were 42,377 white Baptists in 1850, roughly eight percent of the white population fourteen years of age and over, slightly less

⁴³ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 262. Membership is an incomplete statistic for judging Baptist adherence as I discuss in later chapters and briefly at several other points in this introduction. Irons calculates both membership and adherents and makes a good case for their inclusion. While I broadly agree that looking solely at membership statistics understates the influence of Baptist belief, I am less sure that adherents can be measured accurately enough to make the calculation a useful enterprise. See Irons, 4, 280, note 10 for his argument for using adherence statistics and discussion of sources. Regardless, since this dissertation focuses on the role of black Baptist members of churches, I use membership statistics exclusively, although at various points considering the broader nature of Baptist influence on slave and free black communities is vital in the argument of this dissertation. Age demographic data for slaves is not exact since the census did not record slave ages for the 1790 census. I have used the percentage of slaves over fourteen drawn from the 1850 census (42 percent) as well as demographic information drawn from the Historical Census Browser, The University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> (2004). Forty-two percent is a rough estimate rather than an exact figure for 1790, but given that the Virginia slave population was already demographically mature by 1790, it is probably a roughly accurate figure, and comports with the age pyramids from Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 89. It is possible that slave sales had increased the percentage of young slaves in the total population and thus the figure was somewhat lower for 1790, but the six percent figure is still likely to be accurate to within a percentage point either way. Assuming a population 14 and under of more like 35 percent would only drop the figure to five percent. I have assumed that few slaves converted before reaching puberty. Although a few slaves may have converted a year or two before reaching fourteen, evidence suggests that few converted before reaching puberty, so fourteen seems a reasonable cut off point.

⁴⁴ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 97–98.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

than half the corresponding percentage of blacks who were members of a Baptist church.⁴⁶

Partially, the success of Baptists at converting blacks can be attributed to the same factors driving success in converting white members throughout Virginia. The lack of central organization, which could have been a disadvantage, instead was a source of strength: Baptists could spread rapidly throughout Virginia with church members and potential converts. Baptist preachers were not licensed by any centralized body. Instead, the church to which they belonged simply gave them leave to preach, often after a probationary period in which church elders were allowed to evaluate their preaching “gifts.” Some of these preachers were either free or enslaved blacks. One congregation in Gloucester even made a free black man, Isaac Lemon, its pastor.⁴⁷ In response to a request at the previous meeting that several white members “ascertain the number and names of the colored brethren of this church who are licensed to exercise a public gift,” the clerk at the First Baptist Church of Richmond on July 11, 1826 recorded in the minutes that “Ned Cary, Joe Abraham, Bartlett Lewis, Owen Dickerson, Saml Clear were permitted to preach and George Montague, Richard Vaughan, Martin Jenkins, Robert Dandridge, Thomas Johnson, John Craig, and Caesar Hawkins were permitted to speak in public by way exhortation but not to take texts. This meant that they were free to talk about faith to public gatherings but could not deliver sermons in which they explicated texts from the bible.”⁴⁸ Numerous other churches licensed black preachers and they were

⁴⁶ Ibid., 262. Historical Census Browser. The University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> (2004).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁸ Virginia Baptist Historical Society, First Baptist Church, June 20, 1826, July 11, 1826.

an important element in the success of Baptists at reaching slaves, as Charles Irons argues in *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*.⁴⁹

Baptists were successful in converting Virginia slaves, but these slaves did not passively accept Baptist fellowship and worship.⁵⁰ Blacks began to join Baptist churches in significant numbers at the same time as the church brought in many white converts. In this period of growth, slaves dramatically influenced Baptist worship. At the same time they constructed a distinct form of Baptist Christianity. In a few urban areas, separate black churches developed, with varying degrees of white control. A later chapter will examine an example of this phenomenon in Richmond. While these independent churches were important, and have received large amounts of scholarly attention, the vast majority of slaves who converted to Christianity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries worshipped in rural, as well as urban, biracial churches.⁵¹ Biracial churches continued to grow and, in certain ways, the latitude Baptists accorded to slaves and free blacks in matters of preaching and autonomy continued to increase as well.

In August of 1831, Nat Turner led a violent revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, that had important effects on the trajectory of biracial evangelicalism in

⁴⁹ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 104–08. As Irons points out, however, not only Baptists but also Methodists had large numbers of black preachers before 1831. Irons explains much of the discrepancy in numbers between black Baptists and black Methodists as a function of their differing regional strengths in Virginia. Most Virginia Methodists lived in the western counties, the areas with the fewest slaves, while Baptist strength was concentrated in the Piedmont and Southside areas of the state where more slaves resided.

⁵⁰ I am indebted to Irons for the term biracial. Interracial is an equally accurate description but has connotations of equality and racial reconciliation that in this context is best avoided. Biracial is a more neutral description.

⁵¹ I use the term “Christian slavery” to refer to the larger group of slaves who professed belief in the Christian message. Most, but not all, of such slaves in Virginia were evangelicals, primarily Baptists and Methodists. Growth in these denominations was responsible for almost all of the increase in Christianity among slaves during the period this work covers. This dissertation is a study of Baptist slaves and I make no specific claims about slaves adhering to other denominations. My occasional use of the term “Christian slaves” is limited to discussions of the wider movement of slave conversion and adherence, while I use the term Baptist slaves to refer more narrowly to the subjects of this dissertation.

Virginia. Before the revolt was finished, fifty-five whites were dead. A much larger, but unknown number of blacks were also murdered in a wave of reprisal killings following the suppression of Turner and his rebels. Turner was described in press accounts shortly after the revolt as a Baptist preacher, but there is no evidence that he was. His own account, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, narrated by Thomas Grey, a local lawyer, is explicit that Turner was actually rejected by a local Baptist Church for heterodox ideas. Some historians, notably Herbert Aptheker, have asserted based on local oral traditions that Turner was a popular preacher outside of established churches. However, *The Confessions* does not particularly support this view, and much about Turner is essentially unknowable.⁵²

Many white Virginians believed that Turner's revolt was inspired by evangelical teachings. As a result, laws passed after the revolt forbade blacks from preaching and mandated white supervision of all religious meetings involving slaves. Turner's revolt led to a more concerted effort by white evangelicals, including Baptists, to convert blacks to established churches. This movement was born out of the belief that Turner and his followers came out of a loosely organized underground Christianity with highly heterodox beliefs. This so-called "mission to the slaves" hoped to convince white evangelicals that it was their duty as Christians to try to reach more slave members with the gospel.

⁵² See Kenneth S Greenberg, *Nat Turner: a Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) for an overview of the Turner revolt with multiple interpretative essays from different perspectives. See also Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), Kaye Anthony E., "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 4 (2007): 705–720 and Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*.

Some historians have used Turner's revolt and the mission to the slaves as ending points, arguing that after the revolt, the character of biracial Christianity became less open, with whites taking on a more authoritarian role and the possibilities for black freedom of action in biracial churches sharply reduced. This interpretation both exaggerates the freedom allowed blacks in earlier periods, and the scale of the reaction to Turner's revolt.⁵³ Most importantly, an emphasis on Turner's revolt as a catalyst for change has caused historians to overlook longstanding tensions and contestations within and beyond biracial Baptist churches about the meaning of Christianity. Thus, this dissertation defines a period that stretches before and after Turner's revolt, revealing the longer-term effects of large-scale conversion on black communities and the struggles that ensued both within, and outside of biracial Baptist churches.

The meaning of Christian fellowship had the potential to become a divisive issue among slaves within emerging biracial churches. In the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth, some white Virginia Baptists were avowedly anti-slavery. The foremost anti-slavery voice among Baptists was John Leland, a native of Massachusetts. Strongly anti-slavery Baptists were always a minority in Virginia, but in 1790 a group of anti-slavery Baptists, led by Leland, were able to pass a resolution in the General Association condemning slavery as "a violent deprivation of the rights of nature."⁵⁴ However, when delegates reported back to their churches, many white members reacted strongly against

⁵³ For an exposition of this viewpoint see Kaye Anthony E., "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 4 (2007): 705–720. For a more nuanced view on the effects of the Turner revolt on bi-racial Christianity, see Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 133–168. Irons does argue the revolt fundamentally changed white Christians' relationship and views on their slave co-religionists. However, he also argues that the Turner Revolt did not completely reshape biracial Christianity. In general terms much of the work on evangelical religion ends before the 1830s either with Turner's revolt in the case of Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, or somewhat before that as is the case with Heyrman's *Southern Cross*.

⁵⁴ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 69.

the resolution. The Roanoke Association passed a resolution which begun tentatively “we are not unanimously clear in our minds whether the God of nature ever intended that one part of the human species should be held in an abject state of slavery to another part of the same species.” Although the resolution took no position on the rightness of slavery, it denied the right of the Baptist Association, or even churches to pronounce on the question of slavery, instead preferring to “leave every individual to act at discretion in order to keep a good conscience before god.” As Charles Irons speculates, other associations must have voiced similar opinions, for the resolution was withdrawn the next year. For a time, white Virginia Baptists settled on a strategy of simply not addressing the issue of slavery at all, under the guise of congregational independence. This strategy had the effect of mollifying the minority of white anti-slavery Baptists while avoiding a rift in the associations around the issue.⁵⁵

This strategy of avoidance did not completely end the controversy. In 1786, at Black Creek Church in Southampton County, Pastor David Barrow attempted to press the church to adopt a resolution that slaveholding was wrong, and that slaveholding members ought to free their slaves, as Barrow himself had done several years before. Barrow ignited a controversy in the church that would last for seven more years. The white leaders of Black Creek Church declined throughout to endorse either an explicitly pro- or anti-slavery position. Baptist churches and their associations embraced a approach formally in the years before 1800, by insisting that slavery was a subject that should be dealt with by politicians, rather than Baptist congregations.⁵⁶ Some historians, most notably Christine Heyrman, have viewed this move and similar controversies among

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70–72.

Methodists as a retreat by evangelicals from their earlier, radical position. More recent work, such as that of Jewel Spangler, has stressed that opponents of slavery were always a minority within Baptist churches and that Baptists, while they were labeled as dangerous revolutionaries by their Anglican and secular opponents, were always respectful towards civil institutions and inherently conservative in orientation.⁵⁷

It was convenient for white Baptists to claim that the role of their churches was not to fundamentally change the society around them, but this position also fit Baptist ideas about their place in the broader community. The Anglican Church envisioned the church as encompassing the entire society. In this view, all people in the church territory belonged to the church, the godly and the ungodly, the converted and the non-converted. These distinctions mattered a great deal in terms of the role and position of men in the church, but the church was envisioned as containing the greater community.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, believed that the church was a separate community of members united by individual conversion experiences. This evangelical church was, thus, envisioned as smaller than the larger community of church attenders and non-members. Worship services and preaching were open to all and were generally attended by more non-members than members. However, certain key elements of fellowship—meetings where discipline was decided and decisions were made on whether to admit new members, and certain sacramental occasions like foot washing or taking of communion—were limited to the membership of the church. To be a church member meant that an individual had to have experienced assurance of Grace, and had that experience examined

⁵⁷ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 119–66.

for veracity by the church membership. Members were an elect, chosen by god for salvation and granted assurance of grace within their heart.

Baptists, similarly to other evangelicals, viewed the church as within society, but not of it. Baptists did not believe in removing themselves from the corruption of the world, but also insisted that members must not enter into this corruption. Baptists believed members should participate in community life as individuals, but that did not mean they should attend dances, play cards, or drink to excess. When the mores of the larger society and that of the Baptist community conflicted, members were to remember that their primary allegiance was to God. Baptists were expected to model this distinction by not participating in many of the rituals and practices of the outside world such as drinking, dancing, attending horse races or other activities seen by church members as frivolous or sinful. Baptists were also expected to model their conversion by their sober and godly behavior. Baptists were expected not to fight, nor argue, nor engage in rancorous disputes with their neighbors. They were not only focused inward: they were aggressive proselytizers and intent on reaching the unchurched and the unconverted. However, Baptists viewed their main role as converting only those unbelievers who could be converted. This was, of course, not a modest goal but it was certainly a limited one and it put the emphasis on conversion first. Society could become better only if more people accepted the faith.

Baptist beliefs tended strongly against aggressive social action. Although historians, most prominently Rhys Isaac, have emphasized the transformative effects of evangelical beliefs in Virginia on social relations and worldviews, more recent scholarship has emphasized the more conservative aspects of evangelicalism. Jewel

Spangler argues convincingly that while evangelical beliefs were transformative in some ways there was also a great deal of continuity between Baptist beliefs and what Virginians already believed.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Baptists in particular, were unlikely to mount campaigns designed to fundamentally change Virginia society. Baptist churches were local institutions, and they generally reflected local values and concerns and were unlikely to join in opposition to slavery. As we have seen, individual churches were hostile to anti-slavery resolutions coming from associations. The Baptist idea of the role of the church reinforced this belief. The church, in the Baptist formulation was less of a revolutionary space, dedicated to challenging the larger culture, than a place outside the normal bounds of the world.

For Baptists, salvation was dramatized by the equality between non-equals before god. At a meeting of Second Baptist Church of Richmond in July of 1824 the clerk of the church recorded “At a called ch. Meeting in this month for the special purpose of hearing a relation of the religious experiences of miss Jane Exall and Nelson, a slave: Those two persons were received as candidates for the ordinance of Baptism, which has subsequently been administered to them; and they received as members of this church.”⁵⁹ Such displays of spiritual equality as the joint Baptism of a white woman and a slave were graphic illustration of the power of the gospel. However, for white church leaders, a belief in spiritual inequality created no need to erase the inequality that existed between members outside of the church. In fact, this inequality was an important element of church structure. Most evangelicals readily accepted spiritual equality. However, by imagining the next world as unbounded by racial boundaries, southern white Baptists also

⁵⁸ See Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*.

⁵⁹ VBHS, Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., July 1824.

erased the moral problem of slavery and inequality within churches. Next to eternity, what happened in this world was of little importance in these Baptists' view.

The difficulty for biracial Baptist churches, however, was what equality before god should mean and look like in practice. While churches might give some power to slaves, few gave them all the privileges of white members—who were unwilling to equate spiritual equality with equal government of the church with slaves. Free blacks posed another set of problems for white church leaders, with many churches extending privileges to them beyond those given to slaves, but not all of the governing privileges of white male members. In fact, free blacks were often given leadership positions in the church as deacons who supervised other blacks. Slaves and free blacks were practically never allowed any disciplinary authority over whites, however. Furthermore, in practice Church discipline was not applied equally to white and black members. As chapter three will demonstrate, blacks were often subject to greater scrutiny and were accorded less leniency when they sinned.

Scholarly Approaches to Slave Christianity

Early work on slave Christianity, like Eugene Genovese's 1976 *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, largely focused on master-slave relationships. In contrast, the most recent influential books about slave evangelicalism have focused on church communities themselves, rather than the role of Christianity in slaves' lives. For example, Charles Irons' recent *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* is an excellent study of the ways interracial fellowship influenced

white evangelicals' beliefs about black Christians.⁶⁰ The bulk of existing scholarship on Christianity among slaves and free blacks, however, has been caught in debates about the origins of religious beliefs. Scholars have engaged in long-running debates on whether or not slave Christianity had "African roots."⁶¹ The implicit line of inquiry here was well summed up in a 1997 review essay in *The Journal of Negro History*, in which Steve Vaughan argued that, "by uncovering the degree to which black Christianity was rooted in African religions, historians (and others) hope to explain the seemingly unreasonable behavior of slave converts."⁶² The question was: why would slaves be attracted to an institution that oppressed them —the evangelical church? The writer of the review essay and the historians he wrote about assumed that the answer had to lie in cultural similarities between evangelical Christianity and African cultural carryovers. The notion that there was some particular conflict between slave Christianity and the "interests" of slaves relies on a series of assumptions about interracial Christianity, authority, and the Christian slave community that this dissertation begins to disrupt.

In the last decade, continuing investigation into questions of slave belief has resulted in a great deal of good work on creolization, cross-cultural contact, and identity.⁶³ While this scholarship has been very useful in some areas, it has tended to neglect basic questions about the composition of churches and the places they held in the lives of their members and in wider slave and free black communities. For example, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood's excellent *Come Shouting to Zion* is a thorough exploration

⁶⁰ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*.

⁶¹ For some examples see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 105, Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 129–63, Heyman, *Southern Cross*, 50.

⁶² Steve Vaughn, "Making Jesus Black: The Historiographical Debate on the Roots of African-American Christianity," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 1 (1997): 25–41, 25.

⁶³ See Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*., as well as Sobel, *The World They Made Together*.

of slave conversion in mainland North America and the Caribbean, but focuses far more on the internal dynamics of conversion and its relationship to African practices in the Americas than it does on building a portrait of an emerging slave community.⁶⁴ An exclusive focus on origins has produced a literature that attempts to explain why slaves converted to and found value in Christianity, but has given us little insight into who these slaves were.

Historians have rarely attempted to put together a portrait of Christian slave communities, in Virginia or elsewhere.⁶⁵ As a result, scholars have neglected to ask some of the questions about the appeal of Christianity to slaves and free blacks that they have asked of white evangelicals in the same period. We can certainly ask why evangelical religion appealed to slaves starting in the late eighteenth century, much as we can ask the same question of whites.⁶⁶ Using data I have been able to uncover from church membership lists and census information, I suggest that slaves found Christianity appealing because they were able to establish communities bound by ties of faith that were distinct from, yet overlapping with, already existing slave communities.

The dissertation attempts to ground a cultural history of slave religion in data taken from church records and census roles. Scholars' perception that data on slaves in Christian churches does not exist has compounded their tendency to avoid inquiry into

⁶⁴ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*.

⁶⁵ A small number of scholars have attempted to use aggregate data to analyze the role of Christianity in slave life (see, for example, Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2010). I depart from this approach not only because statistics on slave and free black worshippers are unreliable, but also in order to address the complexities of slave interactions with evangelical churches that are lost when church membership is used as a singular metric.

⁶⁶ The model I have found the most useful has been Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (Macmillan, 1978). Like *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, this chapter uses detailed, locally specific, demographic data to construct a model of church membership and conversion.

the makeup of these churches. Fortunately, this kind of research has become much easier with the advent of web sites containing complete census pages along with searchable indexes. Until searchable internet databases were available, census research was so difficult and time consuming that historians of slave religion largely ignored census sources. However, new tools have made these sources far more accessible. Certainly, I have encountered limits in my efforts to gather detailed information on particular slaves, or comprehensive information on slave church membership. However, census data allows us to see where slaves who belonged to particular churches lived, and who their owners were. Other data, such as slave ages and occupations, is much harder to find, although fragments of it do exist. This data does not answer the question of why particular slaves converted to evangelical Christianity, but it helps us understand the communities they joined.

Slaves who joined churches set themselves apart from the community around them even as they continued to live in it. This overlay of communities was not always harmonious. Historians, perhaps because they have been so focused on conflicts between slaves and whites, have not looked for conflict which slavery created within the slave community between Christian and non-Christian slaves or, sometimes, between slaves who held contradictory visions of the meaning of Christianity for their communities. The disciplinary records kept by churches hold echoes of these conflicts.

Chapter Summary

The first chapter of this dissertation explores the antebellum politics surrounding slave Christianity and its effect on the historiography, starting with the lens of the

writings of Frederick Douglass. Douglass, as an anti-slavery activist, harshly attacked biracial Christianity as a ruse designed to produce docile slaves who could be taught that disobeying their masters was a sin in church. This argument was an effective political critique of the pro-slavery argument, but it has to be understood in that context. I show that Douglass' own biography reveals a more complicated relationship with biracial Christianity. The difficulty for current readers is that Douglass' choice strikes us as so correct. The other alternative, building a slave church within the constraints of a religious system designed by whites to promote the furtherance of slavery, hardly seems like a viable alternative. However, it was the choice that a great many slaves made. Douglass' and other abolitionists' views on slave Christianity exerted a strong influence on the historiography of slave Christianity and biracial churches. The chapter looks at the early historiography and its continuing influence on modern historiography.

The second chapter examines the slave and free black membership of two Virginia churches, one in Southampton County in the far south of the state and the other in Henrico County, outside of Richmond. This chapter uses membership records of these two churches in conjunction with census records to construct a far fuller picture of the composition of slave membership than historians have been able to put together previously. This picture reveals a slave membership constructed through the broad ranging rural networks of Virginia rather than through the boundaries of plantations and farms.

The third chapter suggests that the rise of Christianity among blacks led to struggles over values and leadership within slave and free black communities. It explores these issues through the lens of discipline in Virginia Baptist churches. Discipline

directed against slaves has sometimes been presented as a form of social control of white members over black. An examination of the records shows that social control was sometimes the goal of discipline, particularly in cases against slaves for crimes against slavery, running away, or failing to obey their masters. Discipline not involving crimes against slavery, on the other hand, cannot be regarded as simple social control of whites over slaves. Instead, evidence from church records suggests that church discipline was used by some Christian slaves attempting to enforce certain Christian moral standards and order among other slaves. Viewing discipline as a prism for internal slave conflicts, particularly over marriage, helps us gain a more nuanced view of the cultural conflicts brought on by the rise of Christianity among Virginia slaves.

The fourth chapter examines the role of black deacons in the First Baptist Church of Richmond in an attempt to understand the role of free blacks and deacons in the disciplinary process. This chapter argues that the motivations of free black deacons could be quite complicated. These men often held radical views on race and their role in a slave society, surprising given that their position as deacons was only by the sufferance of whites. These contradictions find particular expression in the person of Lott Cary, a former slave who bought his own freedom, became a deacon, rose to a position of leadership in a tobacco warehouse and eventually left for Liberia. Cary, along with other Richmond deacons and free blacks participated, albeit often quietly, in a transatlantic black world even as they achieved success through their dexterity at convincing whites of their trustworthiness.

Slave evangelicalism was born in Virginia as a widespread phenomenon. The particular ways it developed there, influenced by the particular conditions of Virginia,

were crucial to its development and character as it spread throughout the American South. The large-scale sale of Virginia slaves to other slave-owning regions in the country resulted in the importation not only of slaves, but also of an evangelical Christianity created in Virginia. Conversely, this forced deportation of slaves from the Upper to the Lower South may have been a crucial force in the creation of a distinctive black Christianity. Slaves sold from Virginia brought their distinctive form of Christianity with them to the South and Southwest. Migration, while it rarely appears in this dissertation as a central element of analysis, is a constant shadow. The world of Virginia slaves was haunted by the prospect of forced separation from the tightly and widely linked networks of connections that made the creation of Christian slave communities possible.

CHAPTER ONE: Frederick Douglass, the Slave Church and Historical Imagination

In 1845, Fredrick Douglass added a postscript (or, as he called it, an “Appendix”) to his about-to-be published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Douglass was concerned that he had “in several instances spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion.”¹ Douglass’s concern was not unreasonable. At one point in the *Narrative*, he had claimed that “of all with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.”² Of his former master, Thomas Auld, Douglass wrote, “I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.”³ The argument was not a new one for Douglass. Indeed, it was one of the central themes of his speaking and writing on slavery. Douglass consistently depicted biracial churches in the South as a fraud designed to convince northerners of the benevolence of slavery, and slaves that their status was divinely sanctioned.

However, Douglass wanted to make sure his readers did not mistake his aim. He wanted to make clear that his opposition to slaveholding Christians came not from an

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself: Electronic Edition*. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 118, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html>.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 54.

opposition to Christianity, but rather from a conviction that slaveholding was inconsistent with real Christian doctrine. Slaveholding Christians, he argued, could not be considered Christians at all:

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.⁴

In his attack on white southern Christians, one of Douglass' favorite tactics was to mock the preaching of Southern churchmen to slaves. In Douglass' rendition, this preaching consisted of little except exhortations for slaves to obey their masters.⁵ In an address in Dublin, Douglass went even further in attacking southern churches, telling his audience, "I hate a religion which prostitutes [Jesus'] blessed precepts to the vile purposes of slavery...I hate such a religion as this, for it is not Christianity-it is of the devil."⁶ The crux of Douglass's attack on southern churches was that white preaching to slaves perverted the gospel into a defense of the barbarity of holding humans as property. Southern preaching, he argued, twisted Christianity into something that told slaves to "Look at your hard horny hands, your strong muscular frames, and see how mercifully he has adapted you to the duties you are to fulfill."⁷ In Scotland, Douglass mocked a sermon he claimed to have often heard: "Servants obey your masters...such is the relation

⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁵ Frederick Douglass, "American Prejudice and Southern Religion: An Address Delivered in Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841." Frederick Douglass and John W Blassingame, Ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series I, Vol. 1*. (New Haven, [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Irish Christians and Non-Fellowship With Man-Stealers: An Address Delivered in Dublin, Ireland, on 1 October 1845," Ibid., 35.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, "The Southern Style of Preaching to Slaves: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 28 January 1842." Ibid., 17.

constituted by the almighty between cause and effect, that there can be no happiness neither in this world nor the world to come save by obedience.”⁸

As Douglass well knew, the majority of Christian slaves who worshipped in formal churches in the Chesapeake worshipped in biracial churches. In fact, pro-slavery writers emphasized the participation of slaves in Christian worship as a defense against abolitionists. As we will see, Douglass himself voluntarily attended a biracial congregation, despite his disagreements with the proslavery preaching he heard there. In Douglass’s speeches, however, he attacked white southern Christians, and the churches that they controlled. He rarely mentioned the slaves who were equally responsible for the creation of biracial Christianity in the South. Douglass probably chose to focus on white Christians because attacking black Christians would have made little sense within the context of his aim of exposing the evils of the slave system. However, Douglass’s biography and writings reveal a more complicated, if never fully articulated, critique of slave participation in biracial Christianity.

This chapter first looks at the political context of Douglass’s abolitionist activity and the religious politics that went along with it. I argue that Douglass’s stance on southern Christianity was closely tied to these politics. Next, I tease out Douglass’s own religious history, which he discussed in much less detail. What we know about Douglass’s religious life as a slave suggests a tension between his desire to remain in a biracial Christian community and his increasing doubts about the sincerity of the religious professions of white Christian slave-owners. As a freeman, Douglass rid himself of this tension by rejecting southern Christianity and choosing not to highlight it in his

⁸ Frederick Douglass, “The Free Church of Scotland and American Slavery: An Address Delivered in Dundee, Scotland, on 30 January 1846. *Ibid.*, 151.

autobiographical writings. Instead, he represented true religion as being in conflict with the false religion practiced in the South.

Douglass did not want to openly argue that slaves could not be true Christians, even as his argument clearly pointed towards that conclusion. This was a pragmatic stance. His target was the hypocrisy of religious slaveholders, and Douglass had little wish to attack slaves for their choices. However, his focus also reflected Douglass' complicated past with southern biracial Christianity. Douglass was only fully able to break with this past through his flight to the North, and he understood the choices facing slaves who belonged to biracial churches in the South. As a result, he implicitly rejected the accommodation he had made for Christianity in biracial churches in Maryland.

Most slaves did not leave the sort of detailed records of their thoughts and beliefs that Douglass did, but contemporary church records suggest that many of these same slaves likely believed, like Douglass, that slavery was wrong and that church preaching, which upheld obedience to masters, was something they could ignore. Douglass' own complicated history with biracial churches reveals the impossibility of coming to any kind of unified understanding of the relationship of slaves to biracial churches. Instead, a history of biracial Christianity has to understand the religious choices of slave as inherently complex and multifaceted.

Through his focus on the hypocrisy of white Christians, Douglass created a powerful rhetorical argument. In the telling, however, much about Douglass' own relationship with biracial Christianity became blurred. In many ways, this blurring mirrors the larger problems faced by historians when they attempt to come to grips with the ways slaves interacted with and made meaning within biracial Christian churches.

The second part of the chapter turns to the historiography surrounding biracial churches and slave religion, particularly the work of Albert Raboteau. Raboteau's concept of an "invisible church" emphasized the importance of a hidden, spiritual world created by slaves that stood apart from the churches of which they were members—churches that preached obedience to masters and contentment with earthly conditions. Raboteau's ideas allowed historians to see distinctive forms of slave religious belief and worship. However, like Douglass's writings a century earlier, the notion of an "invisible church" obscures the choices slaves made within biracial churches. By positing that only an "invisible church" could be the place of authentic worship, the idea relegates the visible interactions within biracial churches to a lesser realm of spiritual experience. As a result, historians risk ignoring the reasons slaves chose to join such churches and the value, both spiritual and material, they found in belonging to them.

Douglass and Biracial Christianity

To understand the polemical content of Douglass's attack on Christian slaveholders, we need to understand the place of his work in the abolitionist movement. After 1830, the need for slaveholders to find an acceptable pro-slavery ideology came together with a desire among Christian ministers and laymen to convert slaves and persuade slaveholders to remake slavery as a Christian institution. Increasingly after 1830, pro-slavery ideologues justified slavery by arguing that as an institution it converted slaves and brought them and their masters together as Christian households

within a Christian social fabric.⁹ Douglass responded to this argument quite consciously in the *Narrative* and on his speaking tours until his return from Great Britain and Ireland. Thereafter, while Douglass sometimes addressed religious issues, he switched his focus to constitutional and other concerns. William Lloyd Garrison recognized the value of Douglass's attack on the vision of slavery as a Christianizing, patriarchal institution, writing in the foreword to the *Narrative*, "The effect of a religious profession on the conduct of southern masters is vividly described in the following Narrative, and shown to be any thing but salutary. In the nature of the case, it must be in the highest degree pernicious."¹⁰

Attacks on slaveholding Christians became the primary theme for Douglass during his visit to Britain that followed the publication of the *Narrative*. Again and again, he argued that slaveholders, by definition, could never be Christians. Several times in speeches in England, Douglass mockingly proposed that a ship filled with bibles and missionaries be sent to America. When the ship got there, Douglass said, "The very first persons that would meet to drive back the ship, manned by a Christian captain and crew, the first to level their muskets at that company would be the evangelical Christians of America, who had their property in slaves."¹¹ This was, of course, only a rhetorical point: Douglass had no interest in sending missionaries to slaves, and he knew the offer would

⁹ For the development of pro-slavery Christianity, see John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004). Curtis D Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to Civil War* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1993), Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself: Electronic Edition.*, xii.

¹¹ Frederick Douglass, "Evangelical Man-Stealers: An Address Delivered in Manchester, England, on 12 October 1846. Douglass and Blassingame, Ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series I, Vol. I.*, 465.

not be accepted. Eventually, Douglass would actually oppose a movement to send bibles to slaves as a naïve and pointless exercise. He wrote in the *Liberty Bell* in 1848:

The Bible is peculiarly the companion of liberty. It belongs to a new order of things—Slavery is of the old—and will only be made worse by an attempt to mend it with the Bible. The Bible is only useful to those who can read and practice its contents. It was given to Freemen, and any attempt to give it to the Slave must result only in hollow mockery.¹²

Douglass denounced the preaching of southern white ministers to blacks and the prohibition on reading the bible, but for him these were not the primary hindrances to slaves becoming Christians. For Douglass, Christianity simply could not exist within the context of slavery. By their actions, he argued, slaveholders could not be Christians. But furthermore, slaves were barred by their status from fully practicing a religion founded in the “companion of liberty.”

Douglass took pains to present his opposition to slaveholding Christianity as stemming from his own life experience. The genre of slave narratives put a great deal of emphasis on the veracity of slave accounts. The simplest response anti-abolitionists made to slave narratives was that they were tall tales, concocted by people with no personal knowledge of slavery and for purely political purposes. The discovery that some early slave narratives were not genuine caused later writers of narratives as well as their publishers to be especially attuned to signs of authenticity. After the publication of the *Narrative*, Douglass sarcastically thanked a neighbor of his former master who had written a letter in which he claimed that he remembered Douglass as “unlearned and rather ordinary negro,” incapable of writing the *Narrative*. For Douglass, this attack

¹² Frederick Douglass and Philip Sheldon Foner, Ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (International Publishers, 1975), 255.

helped to verify that he had been an “ordinary” slave in Maryland.¹³ “You have done a piece of antislavery work, which no antislavery man could do,” Douglass addressed the man gleefully.¹⁴

Despite the frequency and vehemence of Douglass’s attacks on Christian slaveholders and their preaching, however, his autobiographies give us scanty evidence of his own religious experiences as a slave. Douglass was uncomfortable with the flattening of his experience that the genre of the slave narrative entailed, and wanted to be believed about the details of his life, but he also did not want to be forced into a simple recitation of facts. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he wrote of his difficulties with his early abolitionist mentors on the speaking circuit who wished him to stick to the “facts” of his story:

Just here arose some embarrassment. It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story month after month and to keep up my interest in it. It was new to the people, it is true, but it was an old story to me; and to go through with it night after night, was a task altogether too mechanical for my nature. ‘Tell your story Frederick,’ would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them.¹⁵

Historians have often failed to listen to Douglass on this point. Despite the title, he did not intend the *Narrative* to be simply a narrative.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, “A Few Facts and Personal Observations of Slavery: An Address Delivered in Ayr, Scotland, on 24 March 1846. Douglass and Blassingame, Ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series I, Vol. I.*, 201.

¹⁴ “Letter from Frederick Douglass: Reply to Mr. A.C.C. Thompson.” *Liberator* (1831-1865); Feb 27, 1846; 16, 9; American Periodicals.

¹⁵ Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I.--Life as a Slave. Part II.--Life as a Freeman: Electronic Edition.* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 361, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html>.

Some of this confusion comes from the nature of slave narratives as a whole. Jeanine DeLombard has argued that in the *Narrative*, Douglass writes from a perspective of “embodied subjectivity” when describing his slavery. Only when describing his work as a lecturer in the North does Douglass switch to a “transcendental or universal subjectivity,” DeLombard argues.¹⁶ In DeLombard’s argument, Douglass’s complaints about only telling his story, rather than denouncing slavery, illustrate his efforts to escape the embodied subjectivity of the slave narrative form. In this format, narratives were presented by abolitionists as the evidence in a case against slavery. The job of a slave narrative, to them, was simply to provide unbiased testimony of the truth. William Lloyd Garrison wrote in his foreword to the *Narrative*, that it showed “slavery as it is.” Garrison pointed out that this testimony could be easily verified, “Mr. DOUGLASS has frankly disclosed the place of his birth, the names of those who claimed ownership in his body and soul, and the names also of those who committed the crimes which he has alleged against them. His statements, therefore, may easily be disproved, if they are untrue.”¹⁷

Douglass certainly wrote the early part of his narrative in the form of testimony, rarely taking the “universal perspective” of one who could analyze his slavery rather than simply tell it. But it is important for historians to recognize this as a deliberately chosen posture. Douglass wrote *The Narrative* to fit into the conventions of the genre, but he did so quite deliberately and consciously, even openly chafing at the limits the form imposed. In this respect, what Douglass left out was as important as what he put in. He shaped *The Narrative* and his early speeches to make a particular case against slavery, including a

¹⁶ Jeannine DeLombard, “‘Eye-Witness to the Cruelty’: Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative,” *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001): 245–75.

¹⁷ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself: Electronic Edition.*, xi.

particular attack upon white Christian slaveholders. Douglass did so because his writings and speeches were inherently political and arguing that the Christianity preached by whites to slaves was a perversion was a strong rhetorical point. Douglass knew from his own experience that the situation was more complex as we can see from his own interactions with biracial churches as a slave.

Why did Douglass talk so little of his own participation in biracial churches? Douglass often used incidents from his slave past as rhetorical ammunition, literally gesturing to the scars on his back as evidence of the brutality of slavery. The answer has to do with the nature of Douglass' polemical strategy. Douglass wanted to "denounce" slavery. He wanted to persuade people who had no personal experience with slavery that it was evil, and that slaveowners who claimed to be Christian were not Christians at all, but hypocrites. Douglass likely chose to focus his attack on biracial Christianity on slaveowners rather than slaves for rhetorical reasons, but perhaps also because he understood the complexity of the motives of slaves who chose to join biracial churches. Douglass rejected the accommodation that these slaves made with biracial churches, when they tolerated preaching and practice that was pro-slavery. In the process, he also rejected the ways this accommodation gave slaves limited opportunities to shape these institutions as well as their other benefits, both secular and sacred. By choosing not to make any direct attacks on the slaves who participated in biracial Christianity, Douglass left an account that obscures his participation in biracial Christian churches as a slave.

By the somewhat scanty details supplied in his account, Douglass appears as a slave to have tried to remain within a biracial Christian community even as he ignored the pro-slavery preaching from the pulpit and begun to distrust the religious sincerity of

slaveholding Christians. Here the distinctions between Douglass the slave and Douglass, the abolitionist writer, begin to blur. It becomes difficult to tell which perspective Douglass speaks from at various points in his account. However, Douglass does describe, in a fragmentary fashion, a shift in his beliefs about aspects of the biracial Christianity of which he was a part.

In all of his autobiographies, Douglass placed his conversion in Baltimore around the age of twelve or thirteen, where he was living as a slave for part of his early adolescence. Shortly thereafter, Douglass was sent back to St. Michael's, a town on the eastern shore of Maryland. There, the nature of his religious activities is even harder to tease out. Douglass never mentioned belonging to any church in or near St. Michael's, though he clearly attended a church in there, since he mentioned hearing preaching there several times in *The Narrative*. He could easily have attended a church to which he did not belong, as was quite common.¹⁸ We have other evidence that Douglass had connections to a Methodist church. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass described Edward Covey, a slaveowner who hired Douglass out near St. Michael's, as "my brother in the Methodist Church."¹⁹ Furthermore, on arriving in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Douglass wrote in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, that "among my first concerns on reaching New Bedford, was to become united with the church, for I had never given up, in reality, my religious faith."²⁰ The statement is revealing because it implies that Douglass believed church membership was an integral component of his religious faith.

¹⁸ See the discussion of "attenders" in chapter two.

¹⁹ Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Electronic Edition*, 208.

²⁰ Ibid., 350–51.

We do not know, however, whether Douglass was a member of any church. He certainly regularly attended at St. Luke's Church, a Methodist Church, which stood in St. Mary's Square in St. Michael's town, as Douglass mentioned in speeches that he "attended" the same Methodist Church as his master, Thomas Auld.²¹ In addition, his sarcastic description of Covey as his "brother" echoes the language that churches used to refer to members of the church. Whether Douglass meant literally that he and Covey were fellow church members cannot be proven, but certainly could point to Douglass' membership in the church.

Regardless of his church membership status, on the Eastern Shore Douglass was clearly struggling with his engagement with the church and church doctrine. Douglass seems to have applied much of church teaching selectively, only following commands from the pulpit if they fit with his own sense of morality. Of his decision to steal food from his master, Douglass wrote "considering that my labor and person were the property of master Thomas [Auld], and that I was by him deprived of the necessities of life—necessaries obtained by my own labor—it was easy to deduce the right to supply myself with what was my own."²² Douglass continued his reasoning, "To be sure, this was stealing, according to the law and gospel I heard from St. Michael's pulpit; but I had already begun to attach less attention to what dropped from that quarter, on that point, while, as yet, I retained my reverence for religion."²³ Douglass denied parts of what he was hearing from the white preachers in St. Michael's, without believing that the church

²¹ Frederick Douglass, *American Prejudice and Southern Religion: An Address Delivered in Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841*. Douglass and Blassingame, Ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series I, Vol. 1.*, 12–13.

²² Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Electronic Edition.*, 189.

²³ Ibid.

was nothing but a front organization for slavery, as he would later come to believe. In his writings, Douglass presented himself at this point as having a clear belief in the evil of slavery, but still implied that he was attending church regularly.

Douglass elaborated this point when discussing the thoughts of himself and his coconspirators in an unsuccessful escape plot:

We were all except Sandy, quite free from slaveholding priestcraft. It was in vain that we had been taught from the pulpit at St. Michael's, the duty of obedience to our masters; to recognize god as the author of our enslavement; to regard running away an offense, alike against god and man...I say, it was in vain that the pulpits of St. Michael's had constantly inculcated these plausible doctrines. Nature laughed them to scorn.²⁴

Why did Douglass still have his “reverence” for religion if he disbelieved so much that he heard from the pulpit of the church? Douglass seems to have managed to achieve a balance in which pro-slavery teachings of the church could be safely ignored while he continued to hold sacred the religious beliefs of the church involving sin, community, and salvation. Crucially, other slaves might have held different views, as Douglass's remark about Sandy illustrates. Slave Christianity was always a contested arena, not only in the North for escaped slaves, but for those still enslaved in the South as well. As the remainder of this dissertation illustrates, the debate between abolitionists and advocates over the validity of Christian slavery paralleled a debate among southern slaves about the meaning of their Christianity under slavery. Many slaves continued to attend and hold membership in biracial churches and continued to believe doing so was right. Religion could be a unifying factor for slaves, as many historians have argued it was, but

²⁴ Ibid., 155.

it could also divide them—especially during a time of large-scale slave conversion to evangelical forms of Christianity.

Douglass was not a typical slave, of course, but that is not the important point to take from his struggles with biracial churches. In *The Narrative* and in his later autobiographies Douglass paints a picture of himself moving from an acceptance of many of the teachings of a biracial church, even the ones which counseled obedience to masters and mistresses, to a state of doubting these teachings while finding some value in the church, and eventually to a rejection of southern biracial churches as a freedman. Notably, none of these stances were free from contradictions. Douglass already claimed to be an abolitionist, even when he seems to have continued to listen to pro slavery preaching. (He mentioned that he no longer accepted instructions to obey his master, implying that at one point he did not reject this preaching.) In addition, it remains unclear from Douglass' writings exactly what his relationship was to the biracial Methodist church on the eastern shore. Most importantly, even as an abolitionist lecturer, Douglass confined his denunciations of Southern Christianity to whites. When we note that he remained silent on what he believed about slaves who belonged to biracial churches, we need to understand the deliberate way in which he downplayed the complicated and sometimes contradictory relationships of slaves to biracial churches.

The Historiography of Christianity and Slavery

Before the 1930s, the lines of historiographical debate about biracial Christianity recapitulated debates between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates during the antebellum period. The academic study of slavery before the 1930s was dominated by

Ulrich B. Phillips, his graduate students, and others in his orbit. These historians pointed to the Christianization of slaves as an example of the achievements of the institution.²⁵ In *The Negro Church*, written in 1903, W.E.B. Dubois laid out a response to these historians that drew heavily on abolitionist themes. Dubois highlighted the continuation of barriers to full fellowship and worship, including literacy bans and restrictions on slave preaching. To reinforce this point, Dubois quoted Lunsford Lane, the author of an early 1840s slave narrative:

There was one hard doctrine to which we as slaves were compelled to listen, which I found difficult to receive. We were often told by the ministers how much we owed to God for bringing us over from the benighted shores of Africa and permitting us to listen to the sound of the gospel. In ignorance of any special revelation that God had made to master, or to his ancestors, that my ancestors should be stolen and enslaved on the soil of America to accomplish their salvation, I was slow to believe all my teachers enjoined on this subject. How surprising then, this high moral end being accomplished, that no proclamation of emancipation had before this been made!²⁶

Like Douglass, Lane emphasized the bankruptcy of slave owners' pro-slavery arguments, and used his direct experience to contradict them. Like Douglass, he focused far more on the religion of southern slaveholders and its hypocrisy than the religion of southern slaves and this was the point Dubois wished to emphasize. Carter Woodson, a contemporary of Dubois, wrote *The History of the Negro Church* in 1921 that focused on the eventual creation of separate black churches before the Civil War and their continuation after the

²⁵ For historiographical treatments of Phillips and his work see Robert William Fogel, *The Slavery Debates, 1952-1990: A Retrospective* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2003), John David Smith, *An Old Creed for the New South: Proslavery Ideology and Historiography, 1865-1918* (Westport, Conn: Greenhaven Press, 1985), and John Herbert Roper, *U.B. Phillips, a Southern Mind* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

²⁶ W.E.B. Dubois, Ed., *The Negro Church. Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903: Electronic Edition*. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 29, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/negrochurch/dubois.html>.

war, rather than on biracial churches. In the period in which Woodson wrote, black churches were a vital social institution, especially in the South, and Woodson was writing a history of this social institution. The result is a work that sometimes has a teleological bent, a trait it shared in common with subsequent histories of the black church.

Scholars in the 1950s and sixties began to move away from older debates. One prominent departure was a new focus on the religious practices of slaves that occurred outside of formal churches. The phrase “invisible church” had its origins in the work of Franklin Frazier, who, like Woodson, focused on the factors that led to the formation of a black church. In his seminal *The Negro Church in America*, written in 1963, he used the term “invisible church” to refer to all of slave Christianity, which, he argued, was defined by a lack of the independent institutional structures of churches run by free blacks in the North, or occasionally the South.²⁷ The “invisible church,” in Frazier’s formulation, was not hidden from masters or the legal system of the South. Frazier wrote that “the key to an understanding of the ‘invisible institution’ may be found in the typical remark of an ex slave who wrote... ‘the colored folks had their code of religion, not nearly so complicated as the white man’s religion, but more closely observed...when we had meetings of this kind we held them in our own way and were not interfered with by the white folks.’”²⁸ Frazier viewed the invisible institution as being entirely separated from the religion of whites, although invisible religion in this view was not conducted in secret. Frazier saw in this slave religion an important element of what would become the black church after emancipation.

²⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

White these meetings were not “invisible” to those who participated or observed them, Frazier argued that what made this institution invisible to historians, and some contemporaries, was the lack of separate denominational edifices.²⁹ The invisible church, to Frazier, was composed of the people who would later participate in separate black churches: blacks who worshipped in churches that were organized and controlled by whites, as well as slaves in the South professing Christianity but having no tie to any organized church. To underscore this point, Frazier talked of the importance in this invisible institution of slave preachers licensed by the church as well as those who operated independently. Frazier’s division of the church in this way was an attempt to draw attention to this “invisible church” which came into the open in the period after slavery. By coining the term “invisible church,” Frazier attempted to bring attention to the role of slaves in the development of the post-emancipation black church.

In his 1978 book, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, Raboteau took the term “invisible church” from Frazier but gave it a quite different meaning. Unlike Frazier, who was concerned with the development of black churches after emancipation, Raboteau was primarily concerned with the invisible church as an expression of slave resistance, and rejection of the pro-slavery Christianity of slave owners. He wrote:

The religion of the slaves was both institutional and non-institutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adopted. Regular Sunday worship in the local church was paralleled by illicit, or at least informal, prayer meetings on weeknights in the slave cabins. Preachers licensed by the church and

²⁹ Ibid., 35–6.

hired by the master were supplemented by slave preachers licensed only by the spirit.³⁰

Raboteau did not deny the importance of the institutional church, but he saw it as an area within which certain expressions were possible and others were impossible. There was little fluidity between it and the “visible church.” The invisible church was by its nature subversive:

At first glance it seems strange to refer to the religion of the slaves as an invisible institution, for independent black churches with slaves did exist in the south before emancipation. In racially mixed churches it was not uncommon for slaves to outnumber masters in attendance at Sunday services. But the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (“hush harbours”) the slaves made Christianity truly their own.³¹

Raboteau’s work relies on an overly bifurcated view of slave religion. As this dissertation shows, there was no bright line between the invisible and the visible church, nor were they even really separate entities.

When Raboteau contrasted the visible church with the invisible He wrote about the invisible in terms strikingly similar to those Douglass used. In Raboteau’s formulation, “slaves were often moved to hold their own religious meetings out of disgust for the vitiated gospel preached by their masters’ preachers.”³² “For more authentic Christian preaching,” Raboteau wrote, “the slaves had to turn elsewhere.” Finally Raboteau argued, “at the core of the slaves’ religion was a private place, represented by

³⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 212.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 213.

the cabin room, the overturned pot, the prayin' ground and the 'hush harbor.' This place the slave kept his own."³³ This private religion, for Raboteau, was a rejection of the public religion of the masters. He writes, "Nowhere is the slaves' rejection of the master's religion clearer than in their refusal to obey moral precepts held up to them by whites, especially commands against stealing."³⁴ As we have seen with Douglass' arguments on the same issue, Douglass implied that slaves were able to separate their disbelief of some church teachings from their feelings about the church as a whole. Raboteau even uses those terms explicitly, writing, "Slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholder's gospel of obedience to master and mistress."³⁵

Visible and invisible do not function as neutral terms in Raboteau's analysis. The invisible church is a reaction to the hypocrisy and weakness of the visible church. To support this claim, Raboteau cites slave testimony from both WPA narratives, collected in the 1930s, and antebellum slave narratives including Douglass's. The trope of the overturned pot illustrates Raboteau's vision of the invisible church as a place of secrecy and of resistance. The overturned pot was a pot or kettle turned upside down, supposedly to catch the noise of slaves' praying, preventing masters or overseers from hearing it.³⁶ The pot shows up quite often in WPA slave narratives and, in this formulation, is an example, for Raboteau, of the distinctive culture of the invisible church.

³³ Ibid., 219.

³⁴ Ibid., 295.

³⁵ Ibid., 294.

³⁶ Ibid., 215. See also George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 42–45 for a further discussion of the overturned kettle that draws much the same conclusions as Raboteau.

However, like Frazier, Raboteau used the phrase to convey the invisibility of slave religion in the existing historiography. As he wrote, “we should speak of the invisibility of slave religion with irony: it is the neglect of slave sources by historians which has been the main cause of this invisibility.”³⁷ Historians of slave religion have generally relied on a few broad categories of primary sources. First, historians have relied on the autobiographies of ex-slaves, many written before the Civil War. By and large these were, like Douglass’ *Narrative*, polemical pieces. Their purpose was to expose the crimes of slavery, although certainly many went beyond this narrow brief. The second set of sources, consisting of slave narratives written after the war, were quite different. These were mostly published in the 1880s and 1890s by aging ex-slaves, most of whom were preachers. Unlike the antebellum slave narratives, these narratives were modeled on conversion narratives. They were intended as narratives of the life and route to grace of respected religious men.

The third significant source base for historians are the narratives collected by employees of the Work Progress Administration in the 1930s from ex-slaves, all of whom were quite elderly. Most of these people had been children when emancipation came. These narratives were written down primarily by local white interviewers. These men and women were often patronizing to their interviewees, reproducing their speech in dialect form. Furthermore, the questions they asked were often leading. Sometimes the transcripts show that the interviewers were inclined to believe that slavery had been an

³⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, x.

essentially benevolent institution and showed unhappiness when former slaves said otherwise.³⁸

The overturned kettle is a good illustration of a problem of interpretation arising from Raboteau's use of the WPA sources. While Raboteau rightly uses this trope to highlight the role of churches as a vehicle for resistance, he paid little attention to the ways the WPA narratives interacted with cultural mythologies well in place by the 1930s. For example, Lucretia Alexander, cited in Raboteau, said of slave religious meetings, "I never saw them turn no pots down neither, but I have heard of that."³⁹ The response reveals two things. First of all, the trope of the upturned pot was clearly present. Lucretia Alexander had heard stories of it. Other ex-slaves quoted by Raboteau also seem to not necessarily be recounting memories of the use of pots. One, for example, said that slaves "would tek dere ole iron cookin' pots en turn dem upside down on de' groun' neah dere cabins to keep dere white folks fun hearin' w'at dey was seyin'."⁴⁰

In this account, personal memory is blended with the telling of a custom the former slave was aware of, as shown by the use of the third person. The wording of the response from Alexander also strongly suggests that she was prompted to discuss the overturned kettle by her interviewer, "I never saw them turn down no pots neither, but I

³⁸ During a time of pervasive segregation and racial terror many ex-slaves likely gave answers that they believed the interviewers wanted to hear. In addition, the subjects were mostly very old men and women recalling their childhood in slavery more than sixty-five years before. These factors pose particular problems for historians in interpreting WPA narratives. Most historians have used the interviews selectively, putting more credence in accounts from former slaves who were older at the time of emancipation and expressed more critical views of slavery. This approach does make a certain amount of sense, but creates problems of interpretation. On one hand, failing to recognize these problems in the narrative can lead historians to credit to slaves the views of white interviewers reflected back to them. Eugene Genovese saw paternalism as an ideology that slaves, as well as slaveholders subscribed to, largely through his reading of WPA narratives and as a result he may have fundamentally misunderstood the perspective of slaves. On the other hand, a more selective reading of the materials can be difficult to justify and may lead to an unrepresentative view of slavery.

³⁹ Interview with Lucretia Alexander in Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, vol. 8, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 216.

have heard of that.” Both interviewer and interviewee were aware of this trope, and managed to reproduce it in the document. Alexander did not claim to have witnessed any overturned kettles, but it is reasonable to wonder whether some of those who did claim firsthand knowledge had confused a story they had heard about many years ago for an actual memory. Certainly, some slaves spoke of overturned pots as a personal memory and some slaves probably did use a kettle, believing it would keep religious meetings quiet, but it seems unlikely that the practice was as widespread as Raboteau argues that it was, or that it can be used as evidence of the underground character of slave religious life.

As Raboteau was careful to acknowledge, “Secrecy was characteristic of only part of the slave community’s religious life.”⁴¹ The problem becomes ascertaining what practices predominated. Thus, when Raboteau quotes a former slave who told the WPA interviewer, “My Boss didn’ ‘low us to go to church, er to pray er sing. Iffen he ketched us preyin’ er singin’ he whupped us,” the interpretation becomes difficult.⁴² The account is probably accurate, but we cannot know from the source whether this was a common practice or an uncommon one, or if attitudes varied widely among regions in slaveholding states. As we saw with the overturned pot, ex-slave’s memories were not strictly personal. Certainly traditions of secret worship were passed down and they almost certainly do reflect some actual practices, but in the telling these practices may have been amplified in the WPA narratives.

While Raboteau provides, in some ways, a very nuanced account of the relationships between institutional and non-institutional religion, his conception of the

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

⁴² Ibid., 214.

invisible church and the visible is overly oppositional. Antebellum slave narratives suggest that the problem might be in the very nature of the terms “visible” and “invisible.” Some slaves certainly were prohibited from worshipping as they wished. Douglass, as we saw, led religious study meetings that were attacked by a slave patrol. Some slave narratives mention restrictions on religious worship. Here, too, there is reason for some caution. Raboteau quoted the narrative of Peter Randolph, a freed Virginia slave who wrote his autobiography in 1855. The quoted portion of Randolph’s narrative is a description of a secret religious meeting in the woods in Virginia. Much of the rest of Randolph’s narrative seems to fit well into Raboteau’s description of an “invisible church.” Randolph described the preaching of one white pastor who told slaves that running away was a sin put in their minds by the devil. Randolph then wrote of the preacher, “this same Goltney used to administer the Lord’s Supper to the slaves. After such preaching, let no one say that the slaves have the Gospel of Jesus preached to them.”⁴³

However, only a few sentences down, Randolph mentioned that “most of the colored people, and many of the poorer class of whites, are Baptists.”⁴⁴ Several pages earlier Randolph recounts:

After doing their morning work, and breakfast over, (such as it is,) that portion of them belonging to the church ask of the overseer permission to attend meeting. If he is in the mood to grant their request, he writes them a pass, as follows: --
"Permit the bearer to pass and repass to--, this evening, unmolested. Should a pass not be granted, the slave lies down, and sleeps for the day--the only way to drown his sorrow and disappointment.⁴⁵

⁴³ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the “Peculiar Institution”*, (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 32, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randol55/menu.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

These statements hardly seem to fit well into a neat visible/invisible church dichotomy. Randolph seems to be saying that the same slaves who badly wanted to go to church were the same ones who believed that their preachers were bad men preaching against true Christian doctrine. Randolph notes that “others of the slaves, who do not belong to the church, spend their Sabbath in playing with marbles, and other games, for each other's food, &c.”⁴⁶ Presumably, these were not the slaves participating in the meetings Randolph describes at night.

There is no reason to doubt Randolph's account of secret meetings in his area, but these meetings in fact seem to have taken place among slaves who also belonged to the biracial white-dominated churches. Rather than seeing these secret meetings, and other examples of slaves' attempts to control their form of worship, as occurring in opposition to the church, it is more profitable to view them as attempts by slaves to take control of the message and organization of the groups in which they were invested through their membership. Slaves were not forced to join or attend churches, except perhaps in a few extraordinary cases. If they had wished to not attend churches and instead pursue religion entirely outside of the visible churches, they could have done so, but some at least chose not to. This choice strongly suggests that religious activities pursued by slaves outside the church, whether open or illicit, existed in tandem with the visible church rather than in opposition to it. If slaves participated in both it was because they found meaning and community in both.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

One difficulty with Raboteau's use of evidence is that it can be so easily turned to argue its inverse: that black Christianity was weak. In his 1997 article in *The Journal of Negro History*, William Courtland Johnson took the evidence that Raboteau used to argue for an underground church and used it to argue for the fundamental weakness of black Christianity before the Civil War. Johnson argued that Raboteau and subsequent historians had misread the evidence. Where they saw an underground church, Johnson argued that there was only a shallow veneer of Christian belief and practice within the slave community. Johnson used this evidence to point out the difficulties facing the movement known as the "mission to the slaves," in which southern churchmen made a concerted effort to reach slaves, convert them, and bring them in as regular members of churches. Johnson cited contemporary travelers, one of whom claimed that "The religion of the negroes [sic] is such as might be expected from the brutal state of ignorance in which they are brought up; the dignity, the responsibility, the immortality of man being unknown to them."⁴⁷ Johnson's analysis suffers from many of the same interpretive problems that Raboteau faced, albeit in reverse image. Johnson does not pay nearly enough attention to his sources' motivations and viewpoints. For example, he uses a quotation from a white Louisiana journalist who claimed of a group of slaves, "No education-no God-their whole life-food and play, to strengthen their muscles and fit them for the work of a slave."⁴⁸ The belief of whites that many slaves lacked religion is hardly surprising, when it stemmed from a belief that religious traditions departing from southern pro-slavery orthodoxy were illegitimate.

⁴⁷ William Courtland Johnson, "'A Delusive Clothing': Christian Conversion in the Antebellum Slave Community," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 3 (1997): 302.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

In explaining what he believes to be the failure of movements to convert slaves, Johnson cited Douglass' quotation that "For of all the slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst."⁴⁹ Here, Johnson used Douglass to argue that the hypocrisy of slaveholders made Christianity unappealing to slaves. Douglass works so well in Johnson's argument because this was precisely the point Douglass himself wanted to make. The poverty of slave Christianity was a topic Douglass touched on extensively, almost always using it to indict masters who, Douglass argued, were false Christians. On the other hand, as we have seen, Douglass's *Narrative* gives us a more complicated picture of his own and other slaves' relationships to biracial Christianity. Douglass, as a polemicist, denied not the power of biracial Christianity but its legitimacy.

A far more useful approach to the evidence on "invisibility" comes from Charles Irons, who shows how the concept can still be useful without drawing a sharp, impermeable boundary between visible and invisible worship. As Irons illustrates in *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*, the concept of the invisible church is better at describing the ways in which white Christians viewed slave Christianity than it is at explaining the complex dynamics that Christianity brought to slave communities, or how slave Christians and free blacks in Virginia themselves understood Christianity.⁵⁰ White church members were concerned about forms of slave religion operating outside of their control, in Irons' formulation, and this concern motivated and shaped their efforts to attract slaves to biracial churches. The concept has potential, used in this way, because it describes the view of white church members about religion taking place outside of the church.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*.

However, when used to describe black religion, the notion of the invisible church pits slave Christians against white Christians and leaves little room for the conflicts within the slave community or the remarkable success that slaves had in creating a distinctive form of black Christianity within white dominated biracial churches.

Raboteau wrote *Slave Religion* with very little foundational works to rely on and it is a testament to Raboteau that later historians have been inspired to revise his findings. Later historians have built on his work in various ways, but have largely kept alive the concept of the invisible church.⁵¹ The history of the term, however, illustrates many of its problems. It began as a term designed to include the history of religious practice outside of independent denominational churches into a narrative of the black church. Raboteau developed the concept into a form of covert resistance to institutional pro-slavery churches, picking up on abolitionist themes from slave narratives that stressed the moral bankruptcy of pro-slavery Christianity. This rhetoric, while powerful, makes it difficult to see a more complex reality in which slave participation in biracial churches was an important marker of identity even as slaves struggled with the stricture imposed by these churches.

Raboteau's notion of a distinction between visible and invisible churches has benefits as a conceptual system. It allows us to see the actions of slaves in creating a

⁵¹ The most prominent example of a contemporary historian who uses the term and concept of the Invisible Church extensively is Charles Irons. To a large extent, the construct of the Invisible Church has been largely unrevised because few historians have written studies examining slave religious communities since Raboteau. This seems like an odd statement given that numerous historians have written on religion and slavery. Few, however, have actually studied either the makeup of biracial churches or the dynamics of slave worship inside or outside of churches. For works that show a clear debt to Raboteau in the use of the invisible church concept see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 112. Hatch uses the basic concept if not the term. Anthony E. Kaye's, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), 40–1 also does not use the term “invisible church,” but incorporates ideas of hush arbors and secret religious worship. See also Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *“When I Can Read My Title Clear”: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 85–87 for another example of the influence of Raboteau.

Christianity different from that of southern whites. It also, to some extent, reflects the reality that slaves met for religious purposes covertly or at least outside of the bounds of the established church. In addition, as Charles Irons has shown, it allows us to see the “invisible church” as a concern for white southern Christians who feared slave religion operating outside of their knowledge and control. On the other hand, the concept divides slave Christianity in two. On one side is a visible church and on the other an invisible church. This conceptual split was not mirrored in reality— these “two churches” were inextricably linked. Additionally, the terms invisible and visible are not value neutral. The idea of the invisible church is embedded in ideas of slave resistance that implicitly make the visible church a site of collaboration. This structure makes it difficult to see the complexities of the lives of slaves who found value and meaning in biracial Christianity even as they struggled with churches that endorsed slavery and practiced inequality within the church fellowship.

If we continue to take seriously Raboteau’s directive to make slave sources visible, it may require jettisoning the invisible church concept, or at least modifying it. If we are to examine the role of slaves in biracial churches, these churches cannot be seen as in opposition to a more authentic invisible church. Slave religion is no longer invisible. The work of scholars in the thirty-five years since the publication of *Slave Religion*, has made visible far more aspects of slave religion in the pre-civil war South, but it has ironically not provided us with a great deal of insight into the motivations of the decisions made by slaves and free blacks who chose to join biracial churches, and the complexities these choices introduced into their lives and communities.

If we return to the examination of Douglass' relationship with the biracial church, we can see a path towards understanding the contradictions inherent in biracial Christianity. Ideally we can discern how slaves chose to deal with these contradictions, sometimes by rejecting the institutional biracial church as Douglass did, but also sometimes by choosing to remain within it and attempting to shape it to their own purposes and belief. These efforts were difficult and often stymied, but through them slaves were able to create a distinctive black Christianity.

CHAPTER TWO: Geographies of Faith and Slavery: Two Case Studies of Virginia Churches

Introduction

South Quay Baptist Church, in Southampton County, Virginia, was founded in 1775. The first mention of black members in South Quay's minutes can be found in 1778, when the church recorded a resolution that black members ought to attend conference meetings "for their instruction."¹ In 1779, a slave member, "Harrison's Pompey" was expelled from the church for "disobedience to his master."² By 1802, over the twenty-seven years of its existence, recruitment to South Quay had been slow: twelve slaves had converted in that time, along with four whites. No converts had been admitted to the church in six years. In September of 1802, however, a slave listed as "M. Manney's Tom" joined the church. This conversion signaled the beginning of South Quay Church's first large-scale revival, a revival centered almost entirely on slave members. In 1803, another seven slaves joined South Quay. No white members converted in 1803. In 1804, thirty-four slaves joined South Quay, and another thirteen slave members converted in 1805. In those years, only nine white members were admitted to the church. While later revivals would bring in waves of white converts to South Quay Church, the 1803-05 revival was sparked and sustained by relationships among slaves in the surrounding Chowan River Basin.

Despite widespread acknowledgement of slave and free black conversions to evangelical churches in the antebellum South, historians have done remarkably little to

¹ Virginia Baptist Historical Society, South Quay Baptist Church, October 2, 1778.

² Ibid., April 2, 1779.

ascertain which slaves joined churches and what they shared in common. This chapter combines church membership lists, census information, and neighborhood mapping in Henrico and Southampton counties to construct pictures of two interracial Baptist church communities. My research suggests that slaves became members of Baptist churches because of a complex set of choices related to family, plantation, and geographical ties. Master-slave relationships, in this analysis, were only one of several important social relationships influencing slave conversion. The majority of slaves in the churches studied did not belong to owners who were church members, and many of the slaves of slave-owning church members did not join the church. This pattern is confirmed by an analysis of slave conversion. Baptist slaves mostly joined churches that their owners were not members of and a majority of the slaves owned by members of Baptist churches did not join the church. While membership and conversion patterns suggest that slaves chose freely how and when to join churches, it does not suggest that these decisions existed outside of the larger structures of slave life in Virginia. As this and the subsequent chapter reveal, there were numerous connections among slaves and between enslaved Christians and their white co-religionists. While churches presented social possibilities for slaves that did not exist elsewhere, slaves in biracial churches remained enmeshed within their neighborhoods.

Historians have rarely attempted to put together a demographic group portrait of Christian slave communities, in Virginia or elsewhere.³ As a result, scholars have

³ A small number of scholars have attempted to use aggregate data to analyze the role of Christianity in slave life. See, for example, Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation*. Fountain concludes that church membership among blacks never rose above forty percent. In his view, this shows the weakness of Christianity among slaves. Fountain does not deal with the nature of evangelical church membership. As a result, he seems to discount the importance of those who attended church but were not members in evaluating the overall impact of slave Christianity. White membership was around fifty percent at the time

neglected to ask some of the questions about the appeal of Christianity to slaves and free blacks that they have asked of white evangelicals in the same period. We can certainly ask why evangelical religion appealed to slaves starting in the late eighteenth century, much as we can ask the same question of whites.⁴ Using data uncovered from church membership lists and census manuscript data, I suggest that slaves found Christianity appealing because they were able to establish communities in interracial churches which were distinct from, yet overlapping with, already existing slave communities.

Scholars' perception that membership data on Christian churches does not exist has compounded their tendency to avoid inquiry into church membership composition. Fortunately, this kind of research has become much easier with the advent of web sites containing complete census pages along with searchable indexes. Until searchable internet databases were available, census research was so difficult and time consuming that historians of slave religion largely ignored census sources. However, new tools have made these sources far more accessible. Certainly, I have encountered limits in my efforts to identify which slaves went to churches. However, census data allows us to see where slaves who belonged to particular churches lived, and who their owners were. Other data,

of the Civil War. As the introduction argued, evangelicals did not believe that everyone could or should be converted. Admission to an evangelical church was difficult and staying a member could be more difficult for many slaves, as well as whites. As we will see in the next chapter, evangelicals saw expulsion of members from the church as a necessary function of a well-run church community. Seen in this way the numbers that Fountain believes are so low actually look rather high. It is not clear by what standard he views them as low. Certainly, a lower percentage of slaves than whites belonged to churches, but considering that a substantial number of slaves had limited access to churches, especially in some areas of high black populations in the Carolinas and the Old Southwest and that slave adherence to Christianity started from a very low point in the 1770s the differences between white and black levels of adherence hardly seem vast. Fountain also relies solely on aggregate numbers. While these numbers have their uses, and I have used them in previous chapters, they do not tell the entire story and can be unreliable. Even more problematic is that Fountain makes little distinction between different regions of the South. Slave Christianity was very different in Virginia than in Mississippi or South Carolina.

⁴ The model I have found the most useful has been Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*. Like *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, this chapter uses detailed, locally specific, demographic data to construct a model of church membership and conversion.

such as slave ages and occupations, are harder to find, although fragments of data do exist. These data do not answer the question of why particular slaves converted to evangelical Christianity, but they help us understand the religious communities they joined.

This chapter is composed of two case studies. The first is of Four Mile Creek Baptist Church in Henrico County, Virginia, just outside of Richmond. The second case study looks at South Quay Baptist Church in Southampton County, located less than ten miles from North Carolina. For Four Mile Creek Church in Henrico, my data are drawn from a single list of members compiled in 1824 and updated to show conversions through 1833. This has the advantage of allowing us to examine the full membership of a church community at one particular moment. These data can tell us a great deal about the composition of membership but much less about patterns and timing of conversion. The records of South Quay Church, in contrast, contain detailed records that allow me to track conversions from 1788 till 1831. These records, which were kept more carefully than most Baptist church records of the period, allow for a more dynamic analysis of change over time.

I have chosen to construct the chapter as a pair of case studies, rather than drawing data from a wider variety of records, for several reasons. First, there are a limited number of churches that have membership records complete enough to draw confident conclusions from. Instead, aggregate numbers are usually drawn from associations that compiled numbers from the reports of local churches to regional bodies. Aggregating bad numbers does not make them more reliable, especially when historians have very limited information about the nature of the biases involved. More importantly, as I argue in this

and subsequent chapters, Baptist churches were fundamentally local institutions and they varied tremendously based on local circumstances and population dynamics.⁵ Together, the two case studies give us insight into the structure of Baptist congregations.

Membership and Baptist Churches

This chapter focuses on the composition of church membership. It is therefore important to fix the meaning of the term “member.” Virginia Baptists, as evangelicals, believed in conversion. They furthermore believed that church membership was dependent both on individual conversion and on each community’s acceptance of the validity of this conversion. This chapter studies church membership rolls, which are lists of those who were accepted into church membership by individual church communities. It is important to note, then, that these rolls do not reflect the entire Christian community of these areas.

This larger community included numerous nearby churches of other denominations. More challenging is the fact that Baptist membership lists do not record what historians have called “attenders”—people who often went to a church to hear preaching or met for prayer but were not members. In rural areas like Henrico and

⁵ Baptist churches were intentionally designed to be intensively local institutions, and the localism of Virginia Baptist churches is an important theme that runs throughout this dissertation. Unlike other evangelical denominations, such as the Methodists or Presbyterians, Baptists had no episcopal structure. Baptist churches were only loosely affiliated to each other. Functionally, this meant that these churches were largely governed by white male members, but this and the next chapter show how localism extended beyond the interests of this leadership. By examining local patterns of slave membership, we can discern networks constructed by slaves, who were able to use the localism of Baptist churches to construct communities, much as their white co-religionists did. This makes the particular practices of individual Baptist churches understandable only in terms of the local area in which they found themselves. If these differences could be so great across areas of Virginia, they were even larger across the slave South. Differences between various slave states resulted in widely divergent religious practices. To take only one example, the “plantation church,” in which an owner conducted services on his plantation or hired a preacher for this purpose, seems to have existed in various forms in the Southwest. In Virginia, the practice was almost completely unknown. The small size of slaveholdings made such an institution impractical. In Virginia, communities of worship were almost never confined to a particular plantation and instead spanned large numbers of plantations.

Southampton, preaching in any given church did not take place every Sunday. Instead, preaching was often limited to once a month, allowing pastors to preach for several churches in a region. In this environment, it was common for members of other denominations to attend Baptist churches if there was not a meeting at their own church. Even more difficult for historians to categorize are those attenders who did not belong to any church. Church members were unlikely to view these people as fully Christians, a term that meant more than simply belief in religious principles. Certainly, they were not considered “saved,” and as such were not within the brotherhood of the church. Nor, however, were they completely separate from the church community, which was always understood as a small subset of those who attended services.

While lack of data prevents this chapter from considering attenders in detail, thinking about them is important if we are to gain a clear idea of where church members fit in the Christian and slave communities as a whole. Church membership was not designed to be all-inclusive, and Baptist theology recognized clear differences between those who merely attended and were members. In practice, particularly for slaves, these distinctions could become quite complicated. Later chapters will explore the relationship between the Christianity of black church members and the beliefs of those slaves and free blacks who may not have been church members. As the example of Frederick Douglass should remind us, we should not make the mistake of assuming that these distinctions were always clear.

Four Mile Creek Church, Henrico County⁶

Four Mile Creek Church lies in Henrico County, about ten miles southeast of Richmond, Virginia. While it is now an inner suburb of the city, in 1824 it was part of its immediate hinterland. To the south, Henrico County's boundaries largely followed the path of the James River, which turned at Richmond and proceeded almost directly south for about eight miles. The houses of some large and prominent planters lay on top of bluffs overlooking the river and the fertile land beside it. William B. Randolph's Chatsworth Plantation lay on this stretch of the James, and a few miles further down the river was Wilton House, originally built by William Randolph III. As the river turned east again at Dutch Gap, so called because of a small gap of land created by the uneven course of the James, it passed several plantations belonging to Edward Cox, who at one point owned six plantations in Henrico County. As the river turned again, it hit a stretch known as Deep Bottom, because of the river's depth at this point, where the land became swampy and the landholdings grew smaller.

These river plantations were some of the largest in the county, and their composition reveals something of the nature of agriculture in Henrico County. Henrico

⁶ VBHS, Four Mile Creek Baptist Church, 1824-1833. Manuscript United States Census records accessed via ancestry.com. I have not included page numbers for census records as search functions have replaced them as the easiest way to navigate the manuscript census. This section of the chapter was largely based on a database I compiled of the membership rolls of Four Mile Creek Baptist Church. The clerk of Four Mile Creek compiled a membership list in 1824 of all members of the church at that time. To this list I added the names of members who joined the church through 1833. Slave and free members appeared in separate lists. Slaves, as was standard practice, were generally identified with a first name and the name of their master or mistress. I then matched these names with census records. Because my records went through 1833 I primarily used the 1830 Census. When a name could not be found in the 1830 Census, either because of death, migration or through error, I used the 1820 Census record if it existed. Sometimes a slave's owners are identified clearly. Other times, only a last name was used. In a few cases it was impossible to determine which member of an extended family owned a slave. In these cases, I did not hazard a guess. In others, I could identify an owner with a reasonable degree of certainty. I was able to identify owners in the census for 121 out of 157 slaves. Of those who I could not find in the census, some appear on plat lists and seem to have been relatively large planters such as Robert Randolph.

was too far north and the soil was not rich enough to make the production of cotton profitable. The farming economy of the area thus was mixed. Along the James River there were a number of large plantations with substantial slave labor forces by Virginia standards. William B. Randolph's Chatsworth Plantation consisted of 1,286 acres and thirty-four slaves in the 1830s. The Wilton Plantation was home to fifty-three slaves in 1830, and Edward Cox owned sixty-four slaves on his six farms. The lower section of Henrico, below Richmond, contained no plantations with more than seventy slaves in 1830.⁷ The large Wilton Plantation was run by an overseer, as was the plantation of Pleasant Akin and several others.⁸

The county had a large slave population. In 1830, forty-seven percent of the total population of Henrico was enslaved. Away from the river, the majority of whites were smallholders. Most of these small farmers owned no slaves or only a few. Scattered among the small farms were a few much plantations that rivaled the river estates in slave labor force and acreage, if not in grandeur and prominence. There were also many farms that fell somewhere in between the small farms and the plantations, with five to fifteen slaves. Four Mile Creek Baptist Church lay about nine miles west of the James River in the heart of this area (see Map 1, below).

Two hundred ninety-eight names appear on the Four Mile Creek membership rolls from 1824 to 1833.⁹ 139 of those names were of whites—forty-two men and ninety-seven women. 132 slaves appear on the list. Of these, fifty-nine were women,

⁷ 1830 US Census, aggregate numbers compiled from Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>. (2004)

⁸ Library of Virginia, Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm, Henrico Country Records, Plat Books 1 and 2, Reels 114, 178.

⁹ Because of deaths, expulsions and migrations, there were fewer members than this in the church at any one time.

fifty-eight were men, and another eleven cannot be identified as either.¹⁰ Another twenty-six members were free blacks. White men made up only fourteen percent of the total membership of the church. This pattern was the norm among Baptists of the period.¹¹ White men, however, held power in the church out of proportion to their numbers. They directed the business affairs of the church, chose the pastor, and largely controlled acceptance and expulsion of members from the church. Chapter Three examines these unequal power relationships as they played out in church disciplinary proceedings. To understand the social context of these members' authority, however, we need to know more about how they fit into the white population of Henrico.

¹⁰ This was either because no name at all was listed or because the name that is listed does not reveal the gender.

¹¹ See Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 155–57.

Gender	Free Whites	Slaves	Free Blacks	Total
Male	42	59	7	108
Female	97	58	19	174
Unidentifiable	0	11	0	11
Total	139	128	26	293

Table 1: Membership of Four Mile Creek Baptist Church By Race, Gender and Status, 1824-1833¹²

None of the large slaveholders along the river, nor any members of their families, belonged to Four Mile Creek Baptist Church. This is hardly surprising. The major slaveholding families of Virginia in the 1820s rarely had members belonging to evangelical churches of any denomination. The majority of white members of Four Mile Creek Church were smallholders. Of the forty-two white male members of the church, I was able to identify twenty-nine from the 1830 census records. Of these, seventeen (fifty-nine percent) did not own slaves. Another seven (twenty-four percent) owned five or fewer slaves. Three (ten percent) owned between seven and nine slaves. Jesse Frayser, the largest slaveholding planter, owned twenty-nine slaves in 1820.¹³

It is more difficult to determine whether female church members were part of slaveholding households, since only the names of heads of households appear on the census and thus married women usually cannot be identified. Of the women who were

¹² VBHS, Four Mile Creek Baptist Church, 1824-1833.

¹³ Frayser died sometime between 1824 and 1830, and the slaves he owned were still listed under his name in 1831.

heads of household, a few can be identified as slaveholders. Frances Jordan owned nine slaves in 1830, making her, along with Joshua Frayser, the largest slaveholder in the church at the time. The only other woman it is possible to identify as a slaveholder was Sarah Montague, who is listed as having one male slave who was under ten years old in 1830.

The Four Mile Creek Church was not a place where slaves and their masters worshipped together, reproducing the power dynamics of the plantation. Out of the white members of Four Mile Creek Church, only three can be positively identified as owning slaves who belonged to the church. Only one, possibly two, of Jesse Frayser's slaves belonged to the church.¹⁴ Of the white members who owned fewer than nine slaves, none owned slaves who were church members.¹⁵ The white members of Four Mile Creek Church had few connections to large plantations; in contrast, the majority of slaves in Four Mile Creek Church lived on larger plantations. Of the ninety-eight slaves whose owners could be identified, sixty-eight (sixty-nine percent) of them lived on plantations of more than twenty slaves. Only twenty-four (twenty-four percent) of these lived on plantations with more than forty slaves, a reflection of the rarity of very large slaveholders in the region. For the most part, at Four Mile Creek Church, slaves worshipped away from their masters, alongside non-slave-owning whites much less wealthy than their masters.

¹⁴ One slave is listed as belonging to J. Frayser in 1830. This might have meant Joshua or Jesse Frayser, but it also might have been John Frayser, who did not belong to the church.

¹⁵ It is difficult to tell whether there were women in the church whose households might have owned slaves as evidenced by surnames. Twelve women who did not appear on the census shared surnames with slave owners. Many of these names, however, are those of families whose branches appear several times in the census and the number of these women who actually did belong to households owning these slaves was likely much lower.

Most slave members of Four Mile Creek Church lived on large plantations, but membership was not concentrated on particular plantations. Plantations were not converted wholesale. The ninety-eight slave members whose owners could be identified were spread out among a group of forty owners.¹⁶ Furthermore, while many of the slaves of the largest slaveholders were members of the church, these slaves represented a smaller portion of the slaves on these plantations than we would expect if slaves had converted en masse. Only six of Edward Cox's sixty-four slaves belonged to the church. Seven of the Wilton Plantations' fifty-three slaves were church members. Four of William B. Randolph's thirty-four slaves were members of the church.¹⁷ Only among small slaveholders were there cases in which a majority of an owner's slaves belonged to Four Mile Creek. Three out of five of Spotswood Bradley's slaves who were over ten years old belonged to the church. Similarly, Elizabeth Royster had only four slaves, but two of them belonged to the church.¹⁸ The entire membership list cannot give us exact numbers as there are too many people for whom no census data is available or whom I could not identify. However if we look at a table of slaves sorted by slave ownership it is possible to at least estimate numbers. [See Table 4] Of the 793 slaves in the selected

¹⁶ To some extent this lack of concentration of ownership was a reflection of the thirty slaves whose owners owned fewer than twenty bonds people. However even if one only considers slaves living on plantations with more than twenty slaves, there were still eighteen different owners for sixty-eight slaves.

¹⁷ Since the slave population was quite young overall, much of a plantation's total slave population might be too young for church membership. Even accounting for this, the membership patterns on large plantations do not suggest wholesale conversion. For example, on William B. Randolph's plantation in 1830, eleven of his thirty-four slaves were under ten years old and could not have yet been members of the church.

¹⁸ This pattern was not universal. Only one of William Gay's six slaves over ten years old was a church member.

sample, ninety-three are church members, about twelve percent.¹⁹ These data do not suggest that church membership was unconnected to plantations, but they were not a determining factor.

The membership list strongly suggests that Four Mile Creek was a community of choice for slaves in Henrico. Slaves joined the church from the plantations of nearly all of the large slaveholders along the river and inland, but no one plantation's slaves dominated the rolls. This evidence reinforces the existing historiographical consensus that conversion to Christianity among slaves was almost always voluntary.²⁰ Read another way, however, this pattern of membership suggests that the plantation was an influential arena in which slaves formed networks that led to conversion. Since church members were generally a subset of those sympathetic to evangelical religion, the presence of groups of four to seven Four Mile Creek members on certain plantations actually represents a significant Baptist influence in these spaces.

Unfortunately, we can know very little about these individual slaves. Who were Amelia and Moses, the only two slaves of John Archer to belong to the church? Were they husband and wife? What work did they do on the plantation? This information largely remains buried. Suggestive clues about the connections among slave church members, however, can be teased out by combining membership lists, census data, and county land records to map the membership of Four Mile Creek church. The map below begins to show linkages between the slave members of Four Mile Creek.

¹⁹ This sample is taken from a collection of slaveholders in Henrico who had slaves belonging to the church. It is intended as a rough estimate of the percentage of church membership among plantations in which slaves joined the church.

²⁰ See Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Plotting residences of planters and slaves can help us see the patterns behind church membership. Plat lists are not complete enough to pinpoint all, or even most residences. While other sources can give the location of several more residences, there is still not a complete enough record to allow for a statistical breakdown. Larger landownings are likely substantially overrepresented among residences which could be identified. However, I was able to locate a number of residences of church members without slaves in the church further inland. This suggests that the map does accurately represent the geography of church membership in broad strokes. While the church was located away from the James River, most slave members lived along or quite near the James River. The high concentration of slaves from river plantations who joined Four Mile Creek suggests strong inter-plantation ties between slaves on these plantations. One way of understanding these relationships is through river ties. The river was a major highway for commerce. Slaves living along the river included boatmen who participated in the trade river trade between Richmond and the coast. This movement also touched slaves who came into contact with boatmen as they stopped at plantations and farms along the river to trade. The map shows landings at several spots, notably Edward Cox's plantation at Dutch Gap, at which six members of Four Mile Creek Church lived. These landings likely represented important points of contact between slaves from different plantations along the river.²¹

²¹ See Thomas C Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). for a study of connections among slaves along a waterway.

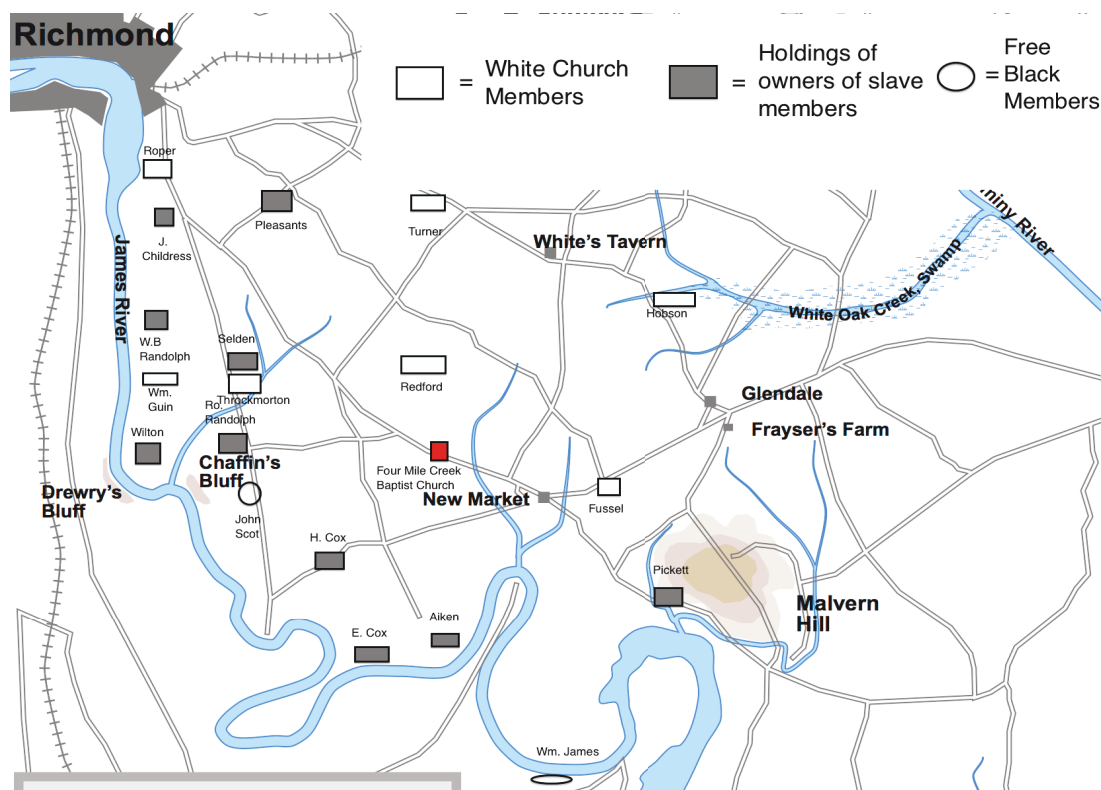


Figure 1: Map of Selected Four Mile Creek Church Members²²

The church membership of Four Mile Creek suggests that membership did not follow the formal boundaries of the plantation but instead traced the informal communities between plantations that slaves had organized. Slaves frequently had

²² Adapted from Seven Pines Map by Hal Jespersen, www.cwmaps.com, under Creative Commons License. Residences from Library of Virginia, Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm Henrico Country Records, Plat Books 1 and 2, Reels 114, 178 and United States War Dept., *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: [s.n.], 1891), plate xvii. The only overlap between the locations of white and slave members was on the plantation of J. Childress. It should be noted that the map is not a complete representation of church members. It represents only those landholdings I was able to locate with a reasonable degree of certainty based on plat records and map sources. Forty slaves members are represented here. It should also be noted that the nature of these sources makes this map only an approximation of landholdings in 1831. Land could change hands through sale or inheritance and plats were filed unevenly. Often the plat may only exist in 1825 or 1840. I have supplemented these sources with civil war maps listing landowners. Obviously land could change hands over a period of more than thirty-five years, but the map still represents a reasonable approximation of landholdings. It should not, however, be understood as a map of holdings at any particular point, but instead as an approximation of selected residences from 1820-1860. Large landholdings are substantially overrepresented on the map. These larger plantations were more likely to have plats filed for them. However, the basic finding that slaves in the church tended to live closer to the James and whites further away squares well with other evidence.

“abroad marriages” in which men married women on plantations that could be miles away. We lack most of the evidence in Henrico of the connections that bound slaves to each other across plantation boundaries, but the evidence drawn from membership lists certainly suggests that they existed and that they were strong.²³

Mapping church membership also reveals some important points about the contrast between slave and white members of Four Mile Creek Church. Almost all of the white members owned few enough slaves that they were likely to have done manual labor beside slaves on their farms. In contrast, most slave members of Four Mile Creek Church lived on plantations that were big enough that owners did not perform manual labor. Only a few white members of the church owned land directly bordering the James River, while a majority of slaves likely resided on riverside plantations. There were several explanations for these patterns of church membership. Recent scholarship has shown that Baptists were not particularly poor, but certainly few wealthy and large slaveowners belonged to Baptist Churches.²⁴ Instead these planters were more likely to belong to non-evangelical denominations such as the Episcopalian church. This tendency may have been increased in Henrico County because some of the plantations along the river were owned by wealthy and influential Virginia families such as the Randolphs. The proximity of these river plantations to Richmond also may have resulted in many of these planters worshipping in the city.

²³ See Lorena Seebach Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 2001), Brenda E Stevenson, *Life in Black and White Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Kaye, *Joining Places*.

²⁴ Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 121–27.

Historians have taken an acute interest in relationships between wealthy whites and their less wealthy neighbors. In *Masters of Small Worlds*, Stephanie McCurry has established that these connections were often deeper and more important than has been appreciated.²⁵ Less studied are the relationships between slaves and non-slaveholding whites. Slaves who traveled across plantation lines may well have forged numerous connections with whites. In the minutes of Boarswamp Church, to the north of Four Mile Creek, there was an account of a dispute between “Nancy Wilkinson of Charles City Church,” a white woman from an adjoining county, and “Mrs. Haley’s Lewis,” a member of Boarswamp Church.²⁶ The minutes do not state the nature of the dispute or what the relationship between the two was, but reveal that slaves in this area could travel long distances and have interactions with a variety of whites.

The other significant group in the church was free blacks, whose membership patterns appear to reflect similarly complex social relationships. Free blacks made up a small but important group in the church. The proportion of free blacks in Henrico County in 1830 was 8.6%, and free blacks made up 8.3% of the membership of Four Mile Creek Church.²⁷ Of the twenty-five free blacks in the Four Mile Creek rolls, eighteen were women.²⁸ Although in urban areas free black women generally substantially outnumbered free black men, this was not the case in Henrico, where there were 571 free

²⁵ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁶ VBHS, Boarswamp Church, November 1806.

²⁷ Henrico County had a high proportion of free blacks for the region, only somewhat lower than that of Richmond City, twelve percent, and neighboring Charles City County, fourteen percent. Across the river in Chesterfield County the percentage was only 3.2 percent and north of Henrico in Hanover County free blacks were only 2.8 percent of the total population. The higher proportion in Henrico is likely explained by the proximity of Henrico to Richmond. Figures drawn from Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia.

²⁸ It should be noted that for free blacks the rolls are evidently not complete. A separate list kept of free black deacons has several additional names not in the rolls.

black women to 518 free black men.²⁹ A large number of the free blacks who belonged to Four Mile Creek Church were related in some manner. Seven names on the roll share the surnames Scot and another four share that of James. There are eleven Scots listed as heads of households in Henrico in the 1830 census, all identified as free blacks.³⁰ Free blacks with both the James and Scot surname lived in Henrico as far back as 1810. Members of both these families owned land. A land plat filed in 1838 describes a roughly eighty-acre tract of land owned by William James, a church member. The land lay on a peninsula created by a bend of the James River, and might have been quite swampy. The plat describes six acres of it as being “below tide water.”³¹

Other free blacks in the church were likely born in slavery and seem to have had substantial ties to local whites. Cary Selden shared a surname with a large slaveholding family and her given name was also closely connected to the same family.³² Jesse Smith was a freed slave between thirty-five and fifty-five years old in 1820 living with his wife, Catharine, also a member of the church, and a young son. Another Jesse Smith was a white slaveholder in Henrico in 1820, and the two were very likely connected in some way.

Analysis of Four Mile Creek records shows clearly that master-slave relationships were not the primary form of relation between slaves and whites in the church. The vast

²⁹ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia

³⁰ Another large group of free black Scots lived within the city of Richmond.

³¹ Library of Virginia, Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm, Henrico County Records, Plat Book 1, Reel 179.

³² James Selden owned thirty-two slaves in 1830, three of whom belonged to Four Mile Creek Church. Cary was a family name within the Selden family dating back at least to the turn of the century. Cary Selden, who was between thirty-six and fifty-five years old in 1830, lived in a household with one boy under ten years old listed in the census as a slave, and another enslaved female between 24 and 36. These may have been children of Selden’s who were free in practice, if not in name, owing to legal restrictions. Selden does not appear in the 1820 Census, indicating that she may have still been enslaved at that time.

majority of slave members of the church did not have owners who were Four Mile Creek members. This pattern can be seen in the geography of church membership as well. Slave members were concentrated on larger plantations near the James River while white members were concentrated away from the river. The implications of these patterns of membership will be further discussed in the next chapter. Four Mile Creek's membership list does not tell us much about the patterns of conversion that created the geography of membership of the church. The next case study allows us to look at some of the factors that may have determined when and whether slaves converted to Baptist churches.

South Quay Church, Southampton

South Quay Baptist Church was founded in 1775 near the village of South Quay, a spot most notable for briefly functioning as a deep water port when Chesapeake ports were under a British blockade at the end of the Revolutionary War. South Quay was a very small hamlet about four miles south of Jerusalem, the modest county seat of Southampton.³³ While only a day's journey from Henrico, Southampton County was separated both geographically and economically from Richmond and from the Chesapeake Basin. Southampton's rivers drained to the Chowan River in North Carolina, which eventually emptied out into the Albemarle Sound. These river systems connected the economy of Southampton to North Carolina, and meant that South Quay Church drew members from a wider geographic area than Four Mile Creek.

³³ Southampton County is best known as the site of Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, an event that to some extent has limited the ways historians have looked at the area's records, which are notable for being remarkably complete for both county and church sources.

Unlike other churches in southern Virginia, the records of South Quay Baptist Church provide an extensive record of conversions beginning in 1788. This data allows us to examine the pace and development of conversions among slave members, and the relationships between the conversions of slaves and whites. Being able to view the data this way is especially valuable because it reveals the role of revivals in building church membership among slaves. Revival has been a much discussed topic among religious historians, but the discussion has largely focused on revivals as emotional events and not in their role in building church membership.³⁴ Work done on slaves and church membership, on the other hand, has mostly ignored the role of revivals. For example, Daniel Fountain's work on antebellum Virginia slave Christianity treats conversion as a regularly occurring process with individual causes, positing that conversion functioned as a coming of age ritual.³⁵ As this section will show, there was nothing regular about the pace of conversions in South Quay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

³⁴See Donald Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*.

³⁵ See Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation*, 6–44.



Figure 2: South Quay Baptist Church, Southampton County, Virginia, Original Building³⁶

Between 1788 and 1831, there were three distinct periods of religious revival in South Quay: between 1803 and 1805, in the year 1812, and in the years of 1827 and 1828.³⁷ In these three revivals, a total of 213 residents of Southampton and nearby Gates and Hertford counties joined the South Quay Baptist church, including 124 whites, eighty-six slaves, and three free blacks. Many fewer members joined in non-revival

³⁶ Photo courtesy Library of Congress, accessed at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006368.jpg>. Original print from Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

³⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, Southampton.

years, totaling only fifty over the entire period.³⁸ Could include a sentence like: In the six revival years, the church added, on average, more than thirty five members per year; in thirty-eight non-revival years, the church added slightly more than one member per year.

		Whites	Slaves	Free Blacks	TOTALS
Revivals:					
Year:	1803-5	9	54	0	63
	1812	28	12	3	43
	1827-8	87	20	0	107
Total converts (revival years)		124	86	3	213
Total converts (non-revival years)		21	28	1	50
TOTALS		145	114	4	263

Table 2: South Quay Baptist Church Conversions, 1788-1829³⁹

To some extent, the overall pattern of conversions fits with what is known about revivals.⁴⁰ Revivals were often specifically aimed at the conversion of whites, particularly white men. While slaves, like whites, converted at higher rates during revivals, the disparity tended to be not as great as for whites. In the 1812 and 1827-8 revivals at South Quay Church, large numbers of white converts began to appear on the membership roles. In the years from 1806 to 1812 only eight new members joined the church, six of them enslaved. Then, in the revival of 1812, thirty-one whites joined the

³⁸ South Quay's growth in membership was not tied to rapid growth in either slave or white populations. Similar to Henrico, Southampton's population was roughly forty-seven percent enslaved. This percentage stayed essentially stagnant from 1790 to 1830, a period in which neither slave nor white populations grew rapidly. The slave population in the county increased from about 6000 in 1790 to roughly 7800 in 1830. Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia.

³⁹ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, 1788-1829

⁴⁰ See, *inter alia*, Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998), John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

church, along with eleven slaves. Again, the growth in membership steadied somewhat. The next fifteen years saw thirty more members join; sixteen of these were slaves. The next large-scale revival occurred in 1827 and 1828. In those two years 107 new members were added to South Quay's rolls, only twenty of whom were enslaved. With the major exception of the first revival of 1803, it was whites who were largely converted during these times of religious excitement.

The great exception to this pattern was South Quay's first revival in 1803-1805, in which fifty-four slaves and only nine whites joined the church. This revival is interesting for two reasons. First, it was a revival that brought in far more slaves to the church than it did whites. Moreover, the timing of this revival so early in the nineteenth century raises larger challenges to what historians have previously assumed about the timing and nature of slave conversion. This was at least fifteen years before the loosely organized evangelical effort to convert slaves in the 1830s, a movement that has become known as the "mission to the slaves." Since much of what has been written of this movement is based on research in South Carolina, Georgia, and the old Southwest, the evidence from South Quay suggests that this research may ignore earlier waves of conversion in Virginia. This dynamic may be particularly important considering that, from the late nineteenth century onward, Virginia slaves were forcibly removed in large numbers to the new plantation frontiers opening in Georgia and Florida, and later in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

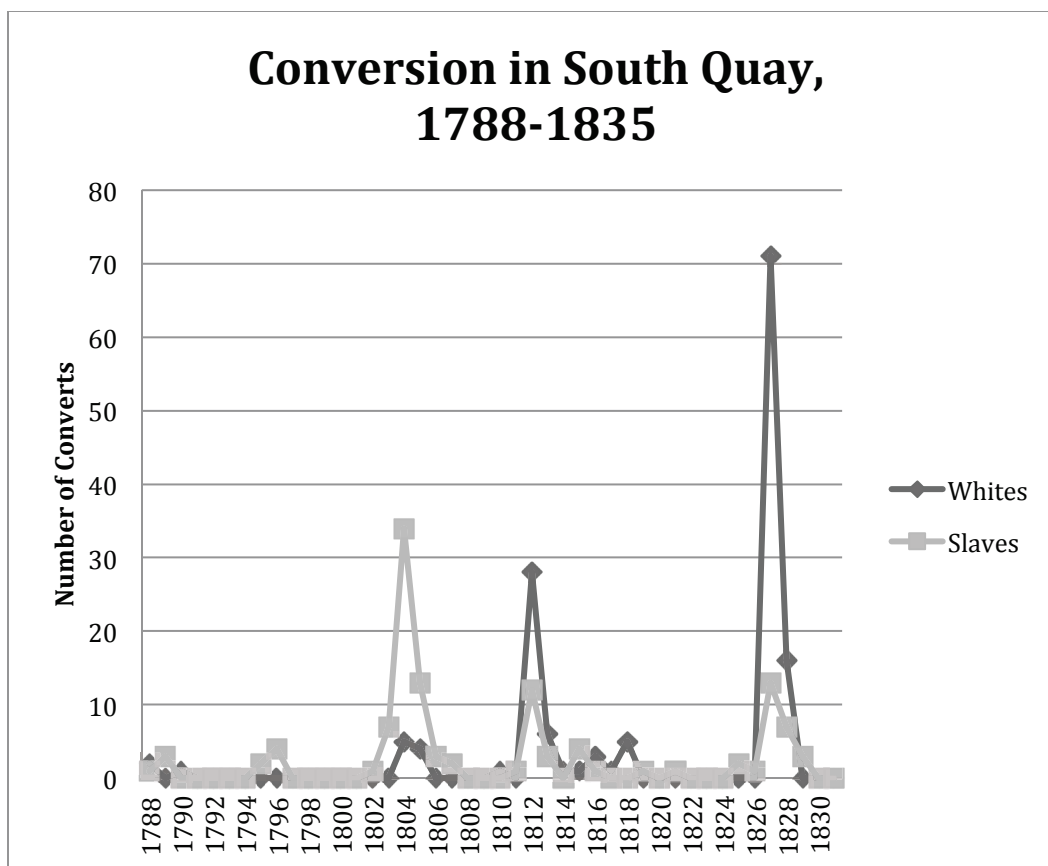


Figure 3: Numbers of Converts to South Quay Church from 1788-1829⁴¹

In order to understand the dynamics of conversion in more depth, however, we need not just an understanding of aggregate trends, but also an analysis of which South Quay-area residents converted during revivals. As in Henrico, the data suggests that religious communities of Baptist churches were grafted on top of social relationships within plantations, and along commercial routes.

Taken as a whole, the list of South Quay members suggests that relationships between the white church members of South Quay formed an almost impenetrable tangle. What is clear is that church membership was strongly linked to family relationships. In aggregate, among whites, there were eight Barneses on the rolls, eight Britts, sixteen

⁴¹ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, 1788-1829.

Dardens, eighteen Daughtreys, fifteen Lawrences and ten Vaughns, to list a few of the larger families. Numerous smaller groupings existed. White church members were frequently related by marriage as well. This overall pattern reflects the tangled kinship networks of Southampton County, a long-settled area of Virginia. When looking at patterns of conversion, however, the influence of specific family relationships becomes clearer. Rhoda and Victor Eley were married in 1805 and were baptized and converted during the 1812 revival. Similarly, John Cooper and his third wife Pheribe both converted in 1827. Larger family groupings also joined in waves. In the 1827-28 revival, fifteen Daughtreys were baptized and received into church fellowship. Jacob Daughtrey Jr., who joined the church in 1818, may have been a crucial lynchpin in the process. His wife Elizabeth joined in 1827, followed by William, Lawrence, Edwin and Darren. In September of 1828, William's wife Elizabeth then likely joined, as well as Abram Daughtrey.⁴²

It is, of course, harder to determine relationships among slave converts from census information and membership rolls than it is for whites. However, a detailed look at the 1803-1805 revival, which allows us to see particular slave conversions at a particular point in time, reveals patterns that suggest relationships among families, within plantations, and along commercial corridors. Unfortunately, the data do not allow us to make definitive conclusions about family relationships among slaves, but they suggest that, like white converts, slave converts may have been influenced by family ties.

Surnames of slave converts' owners let us at least see some connections between slaves. More than two thirds of the slaves who joined in the 1803-1805 revival shared a surname

⁴² There were two Elizabeth Daughtreys in the church. One joined in 1827 and one in 1828. The first was most likely the wife of Jacob, and the second was likely the wife of William, who converted in 1827.

with at least one other slave who joined at the same time. Many slaves seemed to have joined in family groupings, although the exact relationships are often difficult to pin down. Mary and Jacob, who were listed as “of Lewis,” both joined in 1803. Both slaves appear in Benjamin Lewis’ will of 1790, in which he bequeathed them to his son, Benjamin. They may well have been husband and wife, although there exist no sources to tell us for sure.

Located in a rural area of southern Southampton County, South Quay attracted converts from a much larger geographical area than Four Mile Creek Church in Henrico did. As a result, the geographic distribution of converts reveals something of the ties among slaves in the larger Chowan River Basin. There was a strong connection between Gates and Hertford Counties in North Carolina and the 1803-1805 slave revival. Of the fifty-seven slaves who joined during the 1803-1805 revival, at least thirty-four were from either Gates or Hertford Counties, and twenty-two of these were from Gates County.⁴³ Gates County was on the right bank of the Chowan River, about seven miles south of South Quay. Hertford County was on the opposite bank of the Chowan River from Gates. This area of North Carolina had historic links to Southampton that help to explain the geography of conversions. South Quay marked the highest navigable stretch of the Chowan River Basin that fed into the Albemarle Sound. Until the railroad arrived in 1835, these river networks were the primary method of transporting goods and crops to markets.

⁴³ Based on owner surnames another three slaves might have been from either Hertford or Gates and nine were from Hertford.



Figure 4: The Chowan River Basin⁴⁴

While connections between South Quay and nearby North Carolina counties are not surprising, patterns of conversion suggest that these geographic connections were significantly different among white and slave church members. What makes the number of slave conversions from Gates and Hertford Counties particularly striking is that neither county seems to have sent large numbers of white converts to South Quay. The 1803-1805 revival drew in large numbers of Gates County slaves without seeming to have much effect at all on white residents of the county. I was able to positively identify only

⁴⁴ Map available for public use, courtesy of the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program, <http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/apnep/resources/maps>.

five white members from Gates County at South Quay. None of the white members who joined during the 1803-1805 revival that I was able to identify came from Gates County, and only one came from Hertford County. Of the thirty-two whites who joined during the next revival in 1812, none could be identified as having lived in Gates County. In total, from 1788 till 1829, only seven whites (5% of the total number of converts at South Quay) from Gates County joined the church.

The separate cluster of slave conversions from Gates County indicates that while slaves and whites often converted in the same periods, slave conversion patterns did not always mirror those of whites. As in Henrico, slaves who were involved in river transport networks were likely to form relationships along the river, making it a possible mechanism for conversion. This pattern in South Quay, for example, may well have been caused by slaves who worked as watermen along both sides of the Chowan River. The Chowan River is formed by the confluence of the Nottoway and Blackwater, the latter of which flowed quite close to the church. So, while it was some distance from the church to the North Carolina border, it is not altogether surprising that slaves from there would be connected to the church.

Many of the slaves who joined South Quay from Gates and Hertford Counties in the 1803-1805 revival did not have clear links to whites already in the church. Ties among slaves on the same plantations, however, appear to have been important in determining patterns of conversion. Tom, who converted in 1802 and may have precipitated the revival, was owned by James Manney, a planter in Hertford County, or

possibly by one of his descendants.⁴⁵ James Manney was a fairly large slave owner, with thirty-nine slaves in 1790.⁴⁶ While Manney does not appear to have been a church member, another two of his slaves, Jack and Abram, converted in 1796. Similarly, two slaves, who were listed as owned by “Battle,” Tom and Harry, converted in 1804. The owner was probably another Hertford plantation owner, James Battle, who owned eight slaves in 1800. Six slaves who joined during the 1803-05 revival belonged to either Isaac Pipkin Sr. or Isaac Pipkin Jr., who both lived in Gates County and owned forty and fifteen slaves, respectively. Neither Pipkin belonged to the church or had any family that did.⁴⁷

Once begun, the 1803-1805 conversions among slaves in Gates County likely accelerated through the influence of family and plantation structures. We can see some evidence for these connections. The revival seems to have been concentrated in North Carolina among slaves living in fairly large plantations along the Chowan River. Many of these plantations already had one or two slaves who were church members. The first of the Pipkin slaves to join were Dolphan and Lydia, who were received into the church

⁴⁵ Some of the confusion here illustrates source problems. One of the previous Manney slaves was described as belonging to James Manney. No other Manneys can be found in the census. James Manney could have died in the meantime or been missed in the count, but Tom was still described as being owned by Manney. It is possible this meant he was owned by one of Manney’s descendants. Regardless, he almost certainly did live in Hertford. This situation illustrates evidentiary limitations that occur throughout this section of the chapter. The difficulty of trying to reconstruct a dynamic picture of conversion is that it compounds the limits of census data, as well as the limits of the church records of slaves, which often fail to give first names. The reader will thus note the frequent use of “likely,” and “probably” throughout this section. I have only used evidence when I believe it quite likely to be accurate, but I still prefer to use these qualifiers to illustrate the inherent uncertainty of individual pieces of data. The overall argument of this section relies on the preponderance of the evidence rather than on any one piece.

⁴⁶ Neither James Manney nor any other Manneys appear in the census after this date.

⁴⁷ U.S. Censuses of 1790, 1800, 1810.

together on April 30, 1803.⁴⁸ The remaining five—Dick, Sam, Harry and Patty—all joined separately over the next two years. We lack the evidence to figure out the relationship between these slaves, but conversion clearly followed plantation bounds. Similarly, three slaves owned by a Spikes joined in 1804, as well as three owned by a Lewis. There are too many Spikeses and Lewises in the 1810 census for Gates County to be able to pinpoint an owner or owners for these slaves, but there were likely connections that remain invisible to us. The converts among Spikes slaves of 1804 may have built on earlier conversions. Betty and Tom, listed under Spikes, joined together in 1796. The records of South Quay list a further eight conversions among Spikes slaves, for which the year is left unnoted. Similarly, an 1803 convert named Davy, whose owner is listed as Hardy Cross, a slave owner in Gates County, had been preceded in 1796 by another slave owned by Cross, who was named Ruth. One explanation, thus, for the wave of slave conversions from Gates County in the 1803-05 revival is that early conversions produced a founder effect in which slaves connected by marriage, plantation and kinship converted and gravitated towards South Quay Church. All of this strongly suggests that connections among slaves downriver from South Quay Church helped facilitate a revival in the region.

Few of the slaves that converted in the 1803-1805 revival from Gates and Hertford counties were owned by white church members or even by masters with family connections to South Quay. However, when we look at patterns of conversion in South Quay Church more broadly, and beyond the 1803-1805 revival, the picture becomes more

⁴⁸ South Quay gave slaves the last name of their owners. Other churches would identify slaves with the possessive as in “Pipkin’s Dolphan,” rather than “Dolphan Pipkin.” This indicated simply a shorthand rather than a separate surname for slaves.

complicated. Out of 215 slaves who converted over the whole period, twenty were certainly owned by a white member of South Quay. A further sixty could be identified as possibly owned by a white member. Of this latter group, no more than half were likely owned by a church member, although there is no way to be certain.⁴⁹

Connections between slave and white church members are particularly evident when we look at how conversions unfolded over time. On July 4th, 1812, Simon Murfee, a white man, joined the church. A month later, Simon's wife, Lydia Murfee, also joined. Lydia and Simon had been married in 1807, when she was nineteen years old and he was around twenty-nine.⁵⁰ In 1812, then, he was near thirty-four years old and she was twenty-four. In August, Simon's younger brother Wells Murfee converted "at the waterside," and a month later another brother, Richard Murfee, converted as well. Another Murfee, Demerica, who might have been a sister to Wells, Simon, and Richard, also joined later in 1812. Three years after these conversions, a slave woman named Thistle "of Murfee" also joined the church. Thistle might have been a slave of any of the Murfee brothers, since all three owned slaves at the time of the 1820 census.⁵¹ In 1816

⁴⁹ See Library of Virginia, Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm, Southampton County, Will books 4-11, Reels 17-20 for wills used as supplementary data. Unfortunately, South Quay's records did not usually give a first name for the owner of a slave. This has meant that in many cases it has proved impossible to be sure whether a slave's owner belonged to the church. The negative is thus easier to prove for cases in which no whites with a given surname belonged to the church. Sometimes, the census helps by showing that only one person with a particular surname owned slaves. Although this method could conceivably produce errors, for example, if the person in question acquired a slave after the census or acquired one between the date of the census and the recording in the record book, I believe that these are likely to be relatively rare cases. The more problematic cases occur when a surname was shared by many people, both in and out of the church. In some cases, I was able to find a slave and a master linked in probate data, but absent such evidence, I have been forced in these cases to simply say that it is possible a given slave was owned by a church member.

⁵⁰ 1830 U.S Census for Simon Murfee, 1850 Census for Lydia Murfee.

⁵¹ Simon owned 9, Wells 11, and Richard, 14.

another slave, Edith, also joined the church. In this case the record book recorded that she was a slave of Simon Murfee.⁵²

Conversion dates also allow us to see instances, equally common, in which conversion patterns appear to have started with slaves. Rose, a slave of Jordan Edwards, joined the church in 1805. Edwards only joined in 1813. Similarly, Jupiter, a slave of Joseph Buxton, joined during the 1812 revival.⁵³ There were a number of Buxton's grandfather's family who were members of the church, but neither James nor Martha Buxton were among them. It was not until fifteen years after Jupiter's conversion that Joseph would also join, by which time Jupiter had already been a deacon for twelve years. Similarly, Davy, a slave of Hardy Cross, joined the church in 1803, thirteen years before his master joined.

In some cases, there also seem to be links between the conversions of slaves and of whites related to their owners. Ann Gardner converted in 1812, only a few months before Jacob, whom she owned. In the same year, another five people with the Gardner surname joined South Quay, including Ann Gardner's son, Jason, and two more who may have been free blacks.⁵⁴ Similarly, in 1827 Alfred Darden converted at the same time as Jephtha Darden, his older brother. Alfred's wife Sarah converted a month later. The Dardens had a long history in the church. Alfred and Jephtha's mother, father and grandfather had been members. Despite this, neither had converted as an adolescent.

⁵² VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, February, 1816.

⁵³ Library of Virginia, Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm, Southampton County, Will Book 4, Reel 17. Jupiter is mentioned in a will of James Gardner from 1793 when he was leant to Gardner's daughter Martha Buxton with the stipulation that Jupiter was to be inherited by Joseph Buxton when he came of age.

⁵⁴ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, 1810 U.S. Census. I have not yet found records that allow me to get a clear sense of the origins of the free black Gardners, or their relationship to the white Gardners. Complicating the question is that many black and white Gardners shared given names. This is unlikely to be a coincidence, and points to a connection between the two branches.

Alfred was twenty-six and Jephtha was thirty-two in 1827. In September, during the height of the revival, Peter and Harriet, two slaves of Alfred Darden, joined the church as well. At the same time, another slave, Daniel listed only as belonging to “Darden” joined. This slave might have belonged to any of numerous other Dardens, several others of whom were members of the church. In some ways, this confusion is telling of the web of connections which existed between slaves, owners, and their relatives. We have no way of identifying Daniel’s plantation, but the example shows that the linkages between slaves and whites, in the church and out, could be extraordinarily complex in Virginia.

Notably, the evidence from this case suggests that interpersonal ties among slaves were often closely related to the relationships among whites. This should not be particularly surprising. Slaves in Virginia were often highly mobile and interacted frequently with both slaves and whites from their surrounding area and beyond. They might be lent out for a labor task on a relative’s plantation, or travel with their owners. In addition, slaves owned by relatives might have once lived on the same plantation before an estate was divided among the heirs following a death. These interchanges could easily lead to marriages between these slaves and a tighter web of connections.

Conclusion

In *Joining Places*, Anthony Kaye argues that neighborhood is an important, but neglected, element in understanding the structure of slave communities.⁵⁵ In Kaye’s work, the concept of “neighborhood” is rather narrowly defined as adjoining plantations. The vast majority of Kaye’s evidence comes from a few counties near Natchez, Mississippi an area of extremely large plantations. If we are to make Kaye’s ideas useful

⁵⁵Kaye, *Joining Places*.

in examining the structure of slave communities in Virginia, we have to expand and broaden his definition and understanding of neighborhood. Certainly, the cases of Four Mile Creek and South Quay Church suggest that the connections between slaves were influenced heavily by geography. The boundaries of these connections, however could be much more complicated than Kaye's emphasis on adjoining plantations suggests. Both the James River in Henrico and the Chowan River in Southampton seem to have played important roles in connecting slave communities in Virginia, influencing patterns of conversion and membership in Baptist churches.

As the cases of Four Mile Creek and South Quay church show, however, it would be a mistake to limit our understanding of the geography of church membership to physical space. Interpersonal relationships which cut through these geographic boundaries were equally important. Taken together, the two case studies suggest that slaves converted quite early in Virginia, in large numbers and according to patterns of church membership that rested upon a deep web of connections between slaves and sometimes between slaves and whites. Beginning in the 1830s, churches adopted a deliberate policy of slave conversion. More research needs to be done on the effects of this policy and whether it dramatically changed patterns of slave conversion already established in churches like Four Mile Creek and South Quay. However, it is clear that in Virginia, slaves were converting in large numbers before any organized effort was made to bring them in to churches. Historians have long since accepted that conversion of slaves was voluntary, but these two case studies suggest a further conclusion, that patterns of conversion and membership were mostly influenced by internal developments

within slave communities. As the next chapter will show, slaves were in the process of creating a separate Christian culture, the meaning and content of which was contested.

Table 3: Slaveholding of Owners of Slave Members of Four Mile Creek Baptist Church⁵⁶

Owner Name	# of Slaves Owned	# of Slaves in Church
Henry Cox	28	7
William Montague	26	7
Wilton Plantation ⁵⁷	53	7
Edward Cox	64	6
John Velder ⁵⁸	?	6
Wade Moseby	28	5
C. Woodcock	46	5
John Moseby	30	4
Robert Pickett	35	4
William Randolph	34	4
John Archer	40	3
Spotswood Bradley	8	3
Thomas Keese	9	3
B. Moseby	19	3
James Selden	32	3
Thomas West	24	3
Pleasant Akin	58	2
Byrd George	24	2
Thomas Randolph	11	2
Elizabeth Royster	4	2
Thomas Binford		
Estate	14	1
R. Bradley	7	1
Howard Bullington	1	1
Maria Bullington	17	1
John Burton	46	1
Bolling Childrey	4	1
Charles Childrey	3	1
J. Childrey	10	1
Francis Frayser	37	1
William Gay	7	1
Nancy Goode	3	1
Frances Jordan	9	1
William Keese	7	1

⁵⁶ The chart leaves out slaves for whom owners census records could not be found, with the exception of John Velder who was included because he owned six slaves in the church.

⁵⁷ Wilton plantation appears to have been under probate at the time. Both the 1830 United States Census and the Four Mile Creek records record list the slaves as belonging simply to "Wilton."

⁵⁸ Velder did not appear in the 1830 Census.

Ann Lewis	14	1
J. Lindsay	4	1
John Stag	21	1
Robert Wesby	13	1
H. Woodcock	3	1

Table 4: Conversions in South Quay Baptist Church By Year⁵⁹

Year	Whites	Slaves	Free Blacks
1788	2	1	0
1789	0	3	0
1790	1	0	0
1791	0	0	0
1792	0	0	0
1793	0	0	0
1794	0	0	0
1795	0	2	0
1796	0	4	0
1797	0	0	0
1798	0	0	0
1799	0	0	0
1800	0	0	0
1801	0	0	0
1802	0	1	0
1803	0	7	0
1804	5	34	0
1805	4	13	0
1806	0	3	0
1809	0	0	1
1810	1	0	0

Year	Whites	Slaves	Free Blacks
1811	0	1	0
1812	28	12	3
1813	6	3	0
1814	1	0	0
1815	1	4	0
1816	3	1	0
1817	1	0	0
1818	5	0	0
1819	0	1	0
1820	0	0	0
1821	0	1	0
1822	0	0	0
1823	0	0	0
1824	0	0	0
1825	0	2	0
1826	0	1	0
1827	71	13	0
1828	16	7	0
1829	0	3	0

⁵⁹ South Quay Baptist Church, 1788-1829.

CHAPTER THREE: Let No Man Put Asunder: Church Discipline and Marriage among Slaves

Introduction

This chapter looks at the conflicts within the Christian slave community through an examination of church discipline. The previous chapter showed that the relationship between whites and blacks in the church was not usually one between masters and slaves. This chapter examines how this dynamic played out through discipline within churches. Disciplinary proceedings illuminate the tensions within biracial Baptist communities in two ways. First, they reveal the tensions between slaves and whites that occurred when white leaders sought to use church discipline as a mechanism of white control. Second, and more crucially, they allow us glimpses into the ways that slave church members used church disciplinary proceedings to regulate other slaves' social life and to work out disputes about the meaning of slaves' Christianity.

First, the chapter investigates evidence of whites' efforts at social control by analyzing the causes and categories of offenses Baptist slaves faced, particularly focusing on the differences between charges for offenses against the institution of slavery and offenses involving sexual morality. Then the chapter moves to a discussion of discipline within slave communities. Deacons, who were given oversight over black members, played an important role in the debate among slaves over what slave Christianity should look like. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the difficulties faced by slave and white Baptists in dealing with the issue of slave marriage. I argue that the issue of marriage caused rifts among Baptist slaves as some slave members, aided by whites, attempted to enforce an ideal of marriage as monogamous and dissolvable only by death.

This ideal of marriage was closely tied to attempts by slaves to protect their family lives by constructing barriers to the dissolution of families through sale and forced migration away from Virginia.

Baptist discipline insisted that individual church members give up a significant amount of their autonomy to the church. Baptists had to allow the church to scrutinize their interactions with their family and neighbors as well as their habits. Those who fought with neighbors or drank to excess would face discipline. Baptist discipline, as we shall see, could be tolerant of faults, but only if the member accepted the validity of church supervision over his or her life. Charges could be brought by any member against any other member. The institution of slavery changed the disciplinary process drastically. In theory, the bringing of charges could be quite democratic: slaves or free blacks, for example, could bring charges against whites. In practice, slaves very rarely brought charges against whites, while whites often charged slaves with offenses.

Taken as a whole, church records show dramatic differences between the charges brought against whites and blacks. For whites the most common charges were drunkenness and membership issues broadly involving the authority of the church. On the other hand, blacks were most commonly charged with offenses involving slavery and sexuality. There were important differences between these two categories of offenses. Charges for slavery-related offenses came exclusively from white members and were an effort by these white members to use the church as an instrument to control slaves. Conversely, charges involving sexuality sometimes appear to have been brought by slaves against other slaves, as well as by whites against slaves, and involved complicated

disputes about sexuality and marriage not only between whites and slaves, but also among slaves as well.

White Virginia Baptists took the principle of fellowship and theoretical spiritual equality among members seriously, but there were limits to this commitment in a slave society. Discipline did not operate the same for slaves as for whites, although there were important commonalities. The treatment of white and black members charged with personal sins—dancing, gambling, and drinking—was relatively similar compared to cases where the status of slaves came into play. Virginia Baptist slaves were quite frequently charged with offenses against masters or mistresses, including disobedience and running away. I will examine the specific statistics involving disciplinary cases later in the chapter. The statistics reveal that slaves were charged far more often than whites with offenses involving marriage and sexuality. Thus, slave marriage and sexuality were a source of conflict as white leaders sought to deal with the contradictions posed by the sale of slaves away from Virginia and the resulting breakup of slave marriages and families.

Beyond offering a mechanism of social control for white church leaders, church disciplinary cases became an arena for conflicts among black Baptists and others about proper standards of conduct and the very meaning of Christianity for slaves. For slaves, who had few other avenues to enforce order in their lives, church discipline could be a powerful lever. Slaves sometimes used discipline to seek resolution to wrongs done to them by other slave church members. Examining the relationships between deacons and other slaves gives us a window into the role of Christianity in the slave community and can tell us something about how Christianity divided slaves along religious and moral

grounds.¹ As large numbers of slaves converted to Christianity and joined churches, it makes sense that the meaning of these conversions was contested within the slave community. Marriage disputes became a chief venue for arguments about what being a Christian slave meant, and what rules Christian slaves should abide by. Enslaved Baptists struggled with each other over the proper form of marriage, with some slaves pushing to make slave marriages fully monogamous and indissoluble. The motivation for these slaves was at least in part an attempt to stabilize family life and insulate it in the face of sale and deportation.²

Sources and methods

While continuing many of the major themes of conversion and the creation of black Christianity from the previous chapter, the source base I have used for this chapter is somewhat different from the sources used in the previous chapter. In addition to record

¹ Deacons were not, of course, the only slaves who exercised leadership roles within the church, but they were the most visible in the record books. Chapter four addresses the role of deacons more extensively through a case study. Here, deacons reveal divides among slave members. It is not clear that these divides separated deacons and regular members. It may be that deacons simply allow us the only chance to see slaves as both accused and accusers in church disciplinary records and therefore can reveal divisions which otherwise remained hidden.

² Two previous studies of church discipline are particularly relevant for this chapter. Randolph Scully's *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2008), looks at church discipline in Southampton County Virginia, using some of the same records that I use in this chapter, although his emphasis is on churches and conflicts between whites and slaves in the records rather than on disputes among slaves revealed in the records. I have used Scully's data extensively in this chapter. Charles Irons uses disciplinary records in *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008). Irons also explores disputes over marriage through church discipline and argues that slaves were able to force white evangelicals to confront the contradictions between their religious views of marriage and a legal system in which slaves were treated as chattel. Irons argues that while this confrontation bore little fruit, it did result in attempts by white evangelicals during the Civil War to legislate against the breakup of families in several southern states. My argument is complementary to Irons', but focuses on the tensions marriage caused within the slave community rather than on arguments among whites.

books from South Quay and Four Mile Creek churches, I have also used another ten record books from central and southern Virginia.³

We need to understand why disciplinary records were kept in order to understand their meaning. As usual, in attempting to learn about slaves we are forced to do so with records that were not designed to tell their stories, or for that matter particularly interested in these stories. Church records were largely designed for members of the church to refer back to if an issue arose. For example, members who had been expelled many years before often asked for readmission. When they did so, the church went back to the record books to find what the original offense had been in order to judge the sincerity of the penitent's reformation. The record book was largely designed to be a reference for these issues. Disciplinary cases were rarely settled in one session and often dragged on for months. Very likely, the discussion in these cases began with the clerk reading back what he had written to refresh the memories of members who had attended and quickly inform anyone who had missed the previous meetings.

This understanding of the church record book as not simply an archival document but as something to be read aloud is important in understanding its contents. The clerk was aware that he could face scrutiny for what he wrote. Thus, entries were often written in an elliptical manner, especially in sensitive cases in which the clerk might be eager to avoid taking sides in a conflict with his description of the facts. In cases involving sexuality, clerks were often especially delicate in their descriptions, preferring stock

³ These record books are not all equally rich, so I have used some more extensively than others. They also do not all have the same timeframe, although in total they run from roughly 1770 to 1831. I have, for most purposes, considered the period as a whole rather than dealing with change over time in this chapter. Something is lost in this approach, but the evidence base for this chapter is not extensive enough to support periodization.

phrases such as “offense of a delicate nature,” or sometimes formulations which only alluded to the seriousness with which the community viewed the crime. Sometimes these descriptions can actually make determining the nature of the crime impossible, as was the case when clerks simply mentioned that someone had been charged with “disorder, or “improper conduct.” Often, but not always, these terms seem to have euphemisms for cases involving sex. By contrast, events involving drinking or revelry were more commonly described in a clear descriptive style.

Using disciplinary records to understand slave culture requires reading these records against their purpose. White church members were usually not particularly interested in struggles among slaves about Christianity or slave cultural practices. When white church members did become interested in the lives and religious practices of black members, it usually took the form of concern that the practices of black Baptists might differ from those of whites and that blacks within the church might be operating beyond the control of the white church membership. Even at these times, however, whites were more interested in bringing the practices of slave members back in line than in understanding the sources of divergence. At times, as we shall see, white church members actively avoided examining the lives of their slaves closely, knowing that some questions might yield answers that would be unpalatable. However, there is still plenty of evidence available that can give insight into the creation of a distinctive slave Christianity. It is possible to read Baptist church records and uncover at least glimmers of these struggles among slaves. Sometimes this analysis is possible through a reporting of the arguments slaves made to defend themselves and other times through the mechanisms of discipline that reveal the role of slaves in shaping the course of church discipline.

Discipline and Baptist community

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists saw church discipline and even the expulsion of significant portions of church membership as a necessary, and even desirable, function of the church, rather than something to be regretted or avoided. Baptists believed they were an elect and that their elect status must be preserved. Some members who joined, they believed, would be found unworthy of being a member of the body of believers. These people needed to be pruned away from the church body. Church discipline was the instrument for maintaining the purity of the church, as well as for bringing those who repented and reformed back into the church. Thus, it is important to think of conversion and discipline as linked processes in Baptist churches. The process could even be serial. Baptist discipline allowed for the possibility of the readmission of expelled members, which in some respects was much like the initial conversion, an experience whose validity and sincerity was to be judged by the membership of the church as a whole. Members who had been expelled were frequently allowed back into the church through this process.

Disciplinary proceedings worked in a rather similar manner to local law courts. While there was a certain procedural order to the process, some steps might be quickly dispatched or essentially skipped; certainly, members did not feel bound to follow procedures exactly. In essence, however, the process started with a determination of an accused's guilt or innocence, which might be either quickly dispensed with or deliberated at length. If charges were dismissed, then the case was ended, although if members believed charges had been brought maliciously, the church might open another

disciplinary case against the charging member. If church members determined that the accused was guilty of the charges, he or she might be immediately expelled, if the charges were deemed to be very serious. In other cases, members looked for signs of repentance in the offender. Those who acknowledged their offense and promised to reform were often allowed to remain in membership, while those who continued to deny the charges or dispute that what they had done was wrong, or indeed that the church had the authority to judge them, were generally expelled. In some cases, all these steps could be dispensed with in one disciplinary meeting. In other cases, members appointed committees to look into the charges, talk to witnesses, and direct the offenders and accusers to appear at the next disciplinary meeting. These committees then appeared at the next meeting to present their findings. At times cases dragged on, literally for years in a few extreme examples, while the committee attempted, sometimes without great industry, to find and talk with the involved parties, or when the accused or accuser were unable to attend sessions. In some churches, members were suspended during this time, meaning they were not allowed to participate in church rituals such as communion which was reserved for members, or to vote in disciplinary cases.

Charges against members came from both slaves and whites. Any member of the church could initiate disciplinary proceedings, although deacons were often the ones who brought charges. Because charges were often not brought directly by members but through deacons, it is impossible to determine numbers of charges brought by slaves and whites, although it is sometimes possible to guess the source of an accusation. In theory, the bringing of charges could be quite democratic: slaves or free blacks, for example,

could bring charges against whites. In practice such charges were very rare, although in isolated cases white members were sometimes charged with offenses by their own slaves.

Charges could also be brought in response to interactions with the formal legal system, as happened in the case of a slave identified as “Harrison’s Pompey” at South Quay Church. After being seized and thrown in jail in Portsmouth for horse stealing, Harrison was able to convince the church that he was innocent of the charges and the church disciplinary case was dropped. The church record is silent on the disposition of the criminal charge against Harrison. At other times, charges seemed to stem from general neighborhood reputation or gossip, as when the white clerk of Mill Swamp Church recorded that there was “a report prevailing that Tillar, a free Negro woman and member of our church having withdrawn herself from this [church] and joined the Methodist Church.”⁴ In this case, after investigation the church determined that the gossip was false.

The outcomes and purposes of church discipline were various and not at all limited to expulsion or exoneration. On some occasions, the purpose of the disciplinary process was simply to resolve a dispute among members. As Rhys Isaac pointed out in *The Transformation of Virginia*, Baptists took the metaphor of family and fellowship seriously.⁵ It was unacceptable to Baptists that members of the congregation should harbor grievances against each other. What that meant, in practice, was that congregations took on the role of mediators in all manner of disputes between their members. At Tomahawk Church a report was registered of “unhappiness” between two slave members, Fanny and Jerry, both owned by the same master. Jerry accused Fanny of

⁴ Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, June 1799.

⁵ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

“speaking falsely.” The church investigated and decided that the problem was the result of a misunderstanding, rather than any misconduct. Fanny and Jerry were “admonished to lay aside every prejudice that might exist between them as children of God.” Following this admonition, they “gave each other their hand and so the wound was healed and they restored to fellowship again.”⁶ This incident represented the ideal of Baptist community and discipline. A dispute that would have otherwise endangered the unity of the church was instead turned into a public validation of Baptist community. Fanny and Jerry affirmed their commitment to loving each other in the sight of God and reified the ideal of the church as a sphere in which relations played out quite differently than they did in the larger world. Members could settle disputes as members of a family under God, rather than as autonomous individuals through violence or legal means. For slaves, for whom legal means were unavailable, the church disciplinary process likely had a practical, as well as a spiritual, appeal.

In practice, church intervention in disputes between members often proved messier and more complicated than in the Baptist ideal. In one particularly convoluted case in March of 1810, the members of South Quay church investigated a white member, Rhoda McClenny, accused of lying about an unspecified matter. After investigation, the church decided that McClenny was innocent of the charges against her. At a meeting in June, Lemuel Council, a prominent white male member, expressed his dissatisfaction with the verdict in McClenny’s case and left the church in protest. In August, Council was restored “upon acknowledgement,” but he promptly charged McClenny with another lie. Finally, in December, the church cleared McClenny again of the charge, resulting in

⁶ VBHS, Tomahawk Baptist Church, December 1804.

the renewed withdrawal of Council from the church in March of the next year.⁷ The case is a good example of the tendency in Baptist discipline for disputes to ultimately center on the issue of Baptist authority, whatever the original nature of the disciplinary problem. Council left the church because of his unwillingness to be governed by the authority of his fellow Baptist members. Baptist discipline insisted that the individual put his own prejudices, animosities and honor beneath the church and, by proxy, God. Baptist discipline could be tolerant of faults, but only if the member accepted the validity of church discipline over his or her life.

In cases involving personal sins, the ultimate aim of Baptist discipline was reformation. But often, in the absence of reformation, knowledge of the sin and an effort to overcome it was enough. The record of Ethelred Gardner, a member of South Quay with a turbulent disciplinary career, is illustrative of the process of sin and repentance in Virginia Baptist discipline. Gardner was admitted to South Quay church in 1804. Seven years later, he was charged with multiple offenses, likely involving drinking, including unspecified “pranks” on court day (often a day of heavy drinking for men visiting the county seat from outlying towns). He was expelled in November of that year, not for the crime itself, “which he admitted,” but for “attempting to justify” his actions. Repentance in church was not possible without a full acknowledgement of the sin. A year later, in August 1812, Gardner repented in the midst of a large-scale revival in which several members of his family converted. In June of the next year, Gardner was appointed a deacon. In this capacity, he brought charges against another member for the sale of wine.

⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, June 1810-March 1811.

In March 1814, however, Gardner was in trouble again, this time for his involvement in an “affray” at an estate sale. Estate sales, like court days, were often sites for male conviviality and drinking. The church forgave him for the incident. A year later, Gardner was charged again with drinking too much and getting in a fight at an estate sale. He again acknowledged the charges and promised to “refrain” in the future and the clerk added the church’s hope that “the Lord enable him to do so.” In December, Gardner was again charged with “drinking to excess and other disorderly conduct.” Again, he acknowledged that he had sinned and “again resolved to try to get the power of regulating himself in the use of Brandy which he found to be a great will.” The church resolved to pray that he could follow through on his resolution and Gardner was restored in August 1816. However, at the same hearing and at another the next day, two members complained of Gardner’s “conduct” towards them and in November he was expelled again for fighting and drinking. Finally, in February 1818, Gardner told the church he was moving to Georgia and knew that he could not leave as a member. The church agreed it could not readmit him but hoped he would be able to overcome his sins.⁸

The attitude of those accused of crimes was important to the outcome of church discipline. Gardner was afforded multiple chances because, at every turn, he acknowledged that he had been in the wrong, rather than questioning the right of the church to monitor his behavior. In contrast, the South Quay church immediately expelled a member, Alex Booth, who had been charged with being drunk, playing cards, and winning money (apparently a worse sin). Booth was expelled, not for his bad acts, but for “not showing any contrition” at the church meeting. Fighting and other assorted sins were

⁸ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, February 1818.

often handled in much the same way. When Thomas Matthew was brought before Boarswamp church for being involved in a dispute with another man, Thomas Goode, Matthew told the church that “he should not have committed any sin if he had (for certain causes) killed the said Goode also said he should not be easy until he had got satisfaction.” Matthew was expelled, not for fighting, but for his unwillingness to accept the church’s stance and his open defiance of Baptist values.

Other sins, especially sexual sins, were seen as more necessary to resolve quickly and finally. With regard to white members, Baptist churches were committed to enforcing sexual and marital norms. Disorder within the family was not acceptable among the converted, and failure to act when it was suspected would stain the church as a whole. The church prohibited sexual contact outside of marriage. Mary Landers, a member of Chesterfield church, was excluded in 1774 “for the open living with a man unmarried in sin.”⁹ At Metherrin Church in Lunenburg County, a member identified as P. Rivers was charged with having intercourse with a “mulatto girl.” The church conducted a full investigation, interviewing the supposed mother of Rivers’ child and gaining reports from others, including some who claimed that the female slave had “often hinted to [Rivers’] daughters that her master was the father of it.”¹⁰ The church committee talked to the slave as well, who was evasive, and no further mention was made of the incident, suggesting that the committee found the evidence inconclusive. When Tomahawk Church discovered that Elizabeth Powell, a white member, had a baby less than nine months after her wedding, she was charged for the offense. Evidently, church members did not

⁹ VBHS, Chesterfield Baptist Church, August 1774.

¹⁰VBHS, Metherrin Baptist Church July 1772.

consider her offense to be particularly serious; she was forgiven after she apologized and acknowledged her sin.¹¹

Proper behavior within marriage was equally important to church members. Thus, when the members of Boarswamp Church heard that Betsy Goodman was no longer living with her husband, Joseph Goodman (also a church member), two men were sent to discuss the matter with her. Notice the presumption of the church was that it was Betsy Goodman who had to answer for leaving her husband. It was presumed that she had done something wrong by breaking the natural order of the family. However, despite this presumption, church members were prepared to be flexible. The church ended up forgiving Betsy Goodman and expelling her husband, Joseph. The members were evidently convinced that whatever Joseph had done to precipitate the split had justified Betsy's actions.

Disciplining slaves

White Baptists were committed to disciplining slaves. In theory, the same principles applied for slave Baptists as for whites. In practice, the institution of slavery changed the disciplinary process drastically. Baptist slaves were subject to charges, such as running away, or disobeying their master, that no whites were subject to. An analysis of the data collected by Randolph Scully in *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia* shows that these cases directly involving slavery were only about four percent of the total of disciplinary cases brought against blacks.¹² However, if we add theft cases to

¹¹VBHS, Tomahawk Baptist Church, April 1797.

¹² Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 168. Scully's numbers are drawn from his research into Baptist Churches in Southampton County. The churches I have used for this chapter were chosen for the richness of their documentary record. This meant that I made no attempt to make my

the cases directly involving running away or disobedience, the number rises to about eighteen percent, and there is a good case for including charges involving theft: only six whites were charged with theft in Scully's sample as opposed to sixty-one black members.¹³ Although a few of the charges might have involved slave theft from other slaves, the vast majority almost certainly involved slaves taking property from owners or other whites. As we saw in chapter one, many slaves saw this not as stealing, but as taking their due from those who used their labor without compensation. While eighteen percent is not an insignificant proportion, most offenses blacks were charged with did not directly involve slavery.¹⁴

Of the other charges, twenty-three percent were "unknown," that is, their specific nature was not identified in the records. Unknown charges may have included some charges involving sexuality, elided by clerks in the records. However, unknown charges for slaves were only slightly higher than the figure of unknown charges for whites so it probably did not indicate a specific bias. If sexual charges were disproportionately included in the unknown category, there is no reason to believe this was not equally true for whites and blacks. Charges involving drunkenness, fighting, and worldliness were fourteen percent of all cases against black members. For white members, these charges

evidence regionally representative of all of Virginia or even of all of Eastern Virginia. Even had this been my intention, such a task would have been complicated by the coverage of the surviving records, which is hardly uniform. Southampton, for example, has a large number of surviving church records and is thus overrepresented in this chapter. A complete survey of all surviving records would have been enormously time consuming and unnecessary so I have chosen to use Scully's sample of Southampton instead as his dates roughly match the time period of this dissertation. The Southampton data match up with my overall impression of data from the other churches in Virginia. While I have used Scully's published data, I have created new ways of categorizing offenses that better fit my analysis.

¹³Ibid. Scully concurs with my analysis of the linkage between theft charges and slave status based on his data.

¹⁴ Scully does not break down his figures by slave and free black status, likely because of frequent ambiguities in the records that make it difficult to determine with total certainty whether some members were slaves or free blacks. While there were some free blacks in his sample, the overwhelming majority of blacks in Southampton County churches were slaves.

were the largest category making up twenty-seven percent of all charges. The third large category was charges involving sexuality. Broadly, these cases involved accusations of transgressions of marital and sexual mores by church members. These charges made up seventeen percent of the charges against black church members. Among whites, sexual offenses only accounted for eight percent of discipline cases. Other charges involved what Scully calls “membership issues,” that is particular problems in church arising from non-attendance or failure of members to acknowledge church authority over their religious lives in various forms. These made up only ten percent of charges against black members, as opposed to twenty-two percent against whites.

Taken as a whole, this data shows dramatic differences between the charges brought against whites and blacks. For whites the most common charges were drunkenness and membership issues. Blacks were most commonly charged with offenses involving slavery and sexuality. However, there were important differences between these two categories of offenses. Charges for slavery-related offenses came exclusively from white members and were an effort by these white members to use the church as an instrument to control slaves. On the other hand, charges involving sexuality sometimes appear to have been brought by slaves against other slaves as well as by whites against slaves, and involved complicated disputes about sexuality and marriage not only between whites and slaves, but also among slaves as well.

This broad picture is important in understanding the overall trends in discipline cases. However, it would be a mistake to see discipline as inherently pro-slavery in its operation and intent. Baptist churches did not invariably take the side of masters in disputes with slaves. At South Quay in 1794, “Brother Sanders brought sundry charges

against Brother Mingo of Sanders [i.e. Mingo was one of Sanders's slaves]." The church found that there were "no facts proved." against Mingo. Given that set of circumstances, the church decided that the problem was between Sanders and Mingo, rather than an issue of Mingo's conduct. Sanders and Mingo were "advised to get reconciled to each other."¹⁵ In May, they reported "a reconciliation between them."¹⁶ Six months later, however, Mingo was expelled for other unnamed offenses that seemed to also involve disputes with Sanders. The experience of Mingo shows that Virginia Baptists took the principle of fellowship and theoretical spiritual equality among members seriously, but it also shows the limits of such a commitment in master-slave relationships within a slave society.

Discipline did not operate the same for slaves as for whites, although there were important commonalities. Personal sins—dancing, gambling and drinking—had the most similarities. As we saw, fewer slaves than whites were charged with drinking. When they were, charges were sometimes handled similarly, although there were important differences. When Davy, a slave member of South Quay Church, was accused by his master Hardy Cross of "fighting and other improvident and unchristian conduct," he was summoned to appear. He admitted "the charges in part," but lacked "contrition," and was expelled.¹⁷ On one hand, Davy's case was handled similarly to cases of white members charged with similar offenses such as Ethelred Gardner. However, it does help to illustrate a broader pattern in the records in which slaves were often expelled more

¹⁵ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, March 1794.

¹⁶ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, May 1794.

¹⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, September 1830 and October 1830.

readily than white members charged with the same crimes, perhaps because churches were more inclined to see contrition in white members than black members.

In a large number of these cases, the expulsion of slaves was simply reported in the records without either the investigation or the opportunities to repent which were common in cases involving white members. For example, when Mary Smelling charged Grace, a slave owned by Alexander Smelling who was likely a family member of Mary, Tomahawk Baptist Church wrote in the minutes for the August 1806 meeting only that Grace came to the meeting and was expelled, giving no other explanation of the case. This sort of terse and rapid handling of disciplinary cases was uncommon in cases of white members. While more rare, contrary examples are easy to find. At Mill Swamp, a slave named Charles was charged with “drinking to excess.” He was restored to the church after “acknowledging” his crime. At Tomahawk Church, Emanuel, a slave, was expelled for “having drunk to excess and taken the lord’s name in vain.” He did not show repentance, the clerk recorded, leading to his expulsion.¹⁸ In cases not directly involving slavery, the differences between cases involving whites and those involving slaves and free blacks were more evident in how cases were handled than in the basic principles and logic of discipline.

However, in cases where the status of slaves came into play, the situation was quite different. Baptist slave members were quite frequently charged with offenses against masters or mistresses, including disobedience and running away. These cases made up a substantial portion of the disciplinary cases brought against slaves. The most obvious example of churches disciplining slaves for offenses against slavery was in cases

¹⁸ VBHS, Tomahawk Baptist Church May 1807.

involving runaways. Like many discipline charges, the handling and number of cases brought for running away varied widely by church. Of the churches in my sample, South Quay prosecuted far more slaves for running away than other churches. In one of several cases, a slave named Arthur was accused of running away from his master “for several months.”¹⁹ He was eventually expelled for the charge. Nero, another slave member of South Quay, was “charged with refusing to obey his master, and threatening to leave him and deprive him of more of his Negroes and other things tedious to mention.”²⁰ Presumably, his owner had brought the charge. In a few cases, churches excused slaves for running away. Boarswamp church charged Dick with running away and appointed Frank, a deacon, to talk to him. The clerk recorded that Dick made acknowledgements that were “deemed satisfactory.” This was uncommon. It was rare for slaves accused of crimes against their masters to be forgiven. They might be accepted back into the church at a later date, but they were generally expelled if the charges were believed by the white members to be true.²¹

In addition to charges for running away, slaves were also often charged with stealing from their owners. These charge made up fourteen percent of total charges against slaves in Southampton County Baptist churches.²² White Baptists frequently charged slaves in the church with stealing property. Mill Swamp expelled a slave named Phil for “breaking into a house and stealing bacon.”²³ Tom, also of South Quay, “was

¹⁹ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, December 1813.

²⁰ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, April 1791.

²¹ Frank’s role, it is important to note, was not that of an accuser. He was appointed to talk to Dick and did so, and might have played some role in persuading the church not to expel Dick, but the charges were not brought by him.

²² Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia*, 168.

²³ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, March 1790.

charged by his master with stealing and excessive drinking.”²⁴ Slaves were sometimes accused of stealing from someone other than their master, again showing the close ties and mobility among plantations in Virginia. “James of Speights,” a member of South Quay, was, the minutes reported, “suspected” in the “theft” of some bacon from William Manney, who was not a member but owned many slaves who were members.

These were offenses against slavery because it is likely the slaves implicated believed that they had the right to what they had taken. Slaves often believed that stealing from owners was not actually wrong and that they had the right to the products of their labor. As Frederick Douglass described this view in *My Bondage and My Freedom*; “in the case of my master, it was only a question of removal—the taking his meat out of one tub and putting it into another; the ownership of the meat was not affected by the transaction. At first he owned it in the tub, and last, he owned it in *me*.”²⁵ The best evidence supporting this interpretation is the total lack of disciplinary cases occasioned by the report of a slave against another slave for theft of a master’s property. In cases involving slave marriage or in disputes among slaves, slaves sometimes reported other slaves or were involved in the bringing of the charges in more indirect ways. The simplest conclusion to draw is that Virginia Baptist slaves simply did not believe the preachers who told them that disobedience, in this case, theft from their owner, was a sin.

This conclusion has to remain a tenuous one, as it is built on the absence of evidence of slaves or free blacks charging slaves with stealing from owners rather than any positive evidence. On this basis we also cannot be sure whether slaves always

²⁴ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, December 1810.

²⁵ Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I.--Life as a Slave. Part II.--Life as a Freeman: Electronic Edition*. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 189, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html>.

believed stealing from owners was not a sin. It might have depended on the circumstances of the case or on the slave's need for example, but this must all remain speculation.

Another category of offenses against slavery involved disobedience to owners. Here, churches intervened directly to try to enforce an ideal of patriarchal order. Jacob, a member of Mill Swamp Church was charged with lying, as well as "of being of a troublesome disposition." The charges likely came from his master, also a member of the church.²⁶ At South Quay, a slave named Grace was "expelled for very disorderly conduct to her master and mistress."²⁷ Churches were almost always willing to take the word of an owner over that of a slave, or at least show deference to their judgment, as illustrated by a case that occurred in 1818 at Metherrin Church, when the clerk recorded that "Saunders' Adam" had been "discontinued" as a member after being sold away. The clerk went on to write that "sister Saunders" had "declared non-fellowship" with Adam. The clerk explained that there had been "A lengthy and distressing affliction in bro Saunders' black family--a number of deaths--all of them belonging to that part of the family to which Adam was not related or connected, and with whom he was frequently at variance." There was a belief, the clerk recorded, that Adam had made veiled threats towards those who had later died. "Sister Saunders," the clerk continued, believed that Adam had caused the deaths through poison, although he was careful to mention that there was no proof "that he did so."

When asked about Adam's behavior, Adam's former master "brother Saunders" told the church "that his conduct in general was as orderly as common." The church

²⁶ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, December 1789.

²⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, July 1810.

deliberated and in the end only suggested that “Brother Saunders write a letter explaining the circumstances of Adam’s sale, so that if he wanted to attempt to join another church that church could “consider the circumstances and act as they thought right.”²⁸ The case illustrates the reluctance of churches to second-guess the decisions of masters. Even though it is apparent that the members were not confident that Adam had been involved in the deaths, and harbored reservations about his sale, they were unwilling to censure either of the Saunders for selling him away. Church involvement in slave discipline was largely confined to confirming the judgment of masters, rather than questioning their actions in regard to slaves and churches rarely pursued such offenses against slave owning members.

Frederick Douglass recounted that for him, ceasing to believe that obedience to his master was a Christian virtue was an important step towards a more general skepticism of any church that condoned slavery.²⁹ Most Virginia Baptist slaves, however, did not leave the church, even if they may have believed that Christianity did not require absolute obedience to their earthly masters, as evidenced by their non participation in charges brought against slaves for stealing, disobedience, and running away.

Church Discipline and Slave Communities

Whites used church discipline as a method of social control over slaves. However, discipline was not only meted out upon slaves, but sometimes *by* slaves for a variety of

²⁸ VBHS, Metherrin Baptist Church, April 1818. There are many Saunders and Sanders listed in the census and the names appear to be interchangeable. I have not been able to definitively pin down which one is the Brother Saunders referred to. It seems likely that Adam was owned by a James Saunders in 1800, as he appears in an inventory of an estate valued at 96.5 pounds. Brother Saunders may well have been a son of this James Saunders.

²⁹ Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I.--Life as a Slave. Part II.--Life as a Freeman: Electronic Edition.*, 189–91.

purposes. Church disciplinary cases became an arena for conflicts among black Baptists and others about proper standards of conduct and the very meaning of Christianity. These purposes were in some cases instrumental. Slaves sometimes used church discipline to try to protect themselves from violence from other slaves, or as a method for settling conflicts without resorting to violence. They also used discipline in cases related to marriage to try and enlist whites into protecting themselves and their families from forcible separation and dislocation.

Black deacons are an important part of understanding how slave Christians dealt with the disciplinary system. While they did not have a monopoly on control of discipline, for slaves they were the ones most likely to bring charges. Even charges made by other slaves were often presented by the deacons in the disciplinary meetings and they have may have played a role in deciding which of these cases were actually presented to the church. The primary responsibility of black deacons, as far as the white membership was concerned, was to control the black membership of the church, which was mostly composed of slaves. Deacons did not, however, solely act as representatives of the white membership of the church in this regard. Instead, they independently pursued their own agenda. Through an examination of discipline cases we can get some sense of what this agenda was, and through it look at conflicts among slaves about the proper role and meaning of Christianity within slave communities. The next chapter will examine the role and position of deacons within the church in more detail. Here, the focus is on the role of deacons in the discipline process, and in disputes among slaves involving church discipline.

Deacons were a common feature of almost all Baptist churches. The deacon's role in the church was to oversee other members. This responsibility, in theory, was no different from the role of any member of the church—since all members of the congregation were supposed to watch each other and report any sinfulness to the church. In practice, deacons were charged with playing an especially active role in watching and reporting bad behavior. Often, deacons seem to have simply been responsible for bringing information known by other members of the church, or by the larger community, to the attention of the meeting. Deacons were also often asked to make reports when there were questions brought up about the conduct of members, although this was a duty others could perform as well. The role of deacon is best understood as not a formal position, but a role conferred upon certain members that gave them the responsibility of paying particular attention to fellow members, participating in church business, and likely organizing prayer sessions and meetings.

Initially, there were no slave or free black deacons in the churches of my sample, but as the number of slave members grew over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, many churches appointed black deacons. These deacons were responsible for monitoring black members of the church. White deacons generally saw their roles as monitoring both black and white members. South Quay was one of the earliest churches to appoint black deacons, which they did in 1788. The duties of the deacons were described as praying with members and making reports on their misbehavior, as necessary.³⁰ At Boarswamp Church, “Brother Frank belonging to Sister Truman and Bro. Tom Easter belonging to Daniel Hilton [were] given oversight over black members” in

³⁰ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church.

1809. At Beulah Baptist Church in King William County, the first black elders were chosen in 1815.³¹ Other churches never formalized the role of deacon for slaves but nonetheless relied on a small number of slaves to perform the role informally, without the title of deacon.

White Baptists' commitment to enforcing a code of conduct on their black members waxed and waned. Sometimes this inconsistent interest was simply a matter of convenience. At other times it reflected deep unease about the wisdom and morality of applying Baptist standards of conduct to black members, particularly around issues of marriage. Black Baptists were able, often, to fill this void, and use the mechanisms of church discipline for their own purposes.

It is helpful to have some information on the deacons. For a few, sparse details are available. Frank, the deacon appointed at Boarswamp, belonged to a woman named Betsy Truman who lived in Henrico County. Truman was likely a widow, as she lived with four children under fifteen years old. There were two adult women living in the household, who might have been relatives. Ten years later, Betsy Truman does not appear on the census; she might have remarried, died, or moved out of the state. By this time, she could also have been living with one of her children, by then adults. In the 1820 census, only one slave is listed in the household, a man over 45.³² This, in all likelihood, was Frank. This is the only information we possess on him, but it is far more than exists for most deacons. At Beulah Baptist Church, two of the three deacons initially appointed were Osburn and James, both belonging to "L. Hill."³³ L. Hill was Lacy Hill, a much

³¹ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church.

³² 1820 U.S. Census, Accessed via ancestry.com.

³³ VBHS, Beulah Baptist Church, July 23, 1815.

larger slaveholder than Betsy Truman. At the time of the 1820 census he owned twenty-seven slaves. An additional seven free blacks were listed as living in Hill's household. What exactly they were doing there is not clear. Eight members of Hill's household were described by the census as being "engaged in commerce." Of these, we have no way of knowing which slaves Osburn and James were. Hill does not appear in any further censuses. James and Osburn, like most deacons, cannot be identified and we can only guess at their demographic profile.

Deacons played an active role in the cases they reported and seem to have often made particular efforts to enforce codes on sexual conduct. The role of deacons was designed to be an intermediary one between the white male members, who largely controlled the church, and the black members. In practice, this often simply meant that deacons were tasked with summoning members who were suspected of wrongdoing to the next conference to answer to the church. For example, at South Quay Church when "Brother Tom of Battle" was accused of "excessive drinking and with exercising public functions contrary to the rules of the church (preaching), Brother Tom (the elder) of Manney [was] asked to cite him to attend."³⁴ In rural areas this task was not as simple as it sounded. Sometimes it took months to resolve a complaint because nobody had had a chance to notify the accused. White members preferred to have black members perform these duties in matters regarding slaves. Often, as I have shown for South Quay in the previous chapter, a slave deacon might live closer to most of the slave members than white members.

³⁴ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, March 1810.

For slaves who had few other avenues to enforce order in their lives, church discipline could be a powerful lever. Slaves sometimes used discipline to seek resolution to wrongs done to them by other slaves. At South Quay, Abel was “charged with having beaten his brother unjustifiably.”³⁵ Abel was forgiven after telling the church “that he has sought forgiveness of the Lord and found comfort and begged forgiveness of the church.”³⁶ While the record is silent on who reported Abel, it seems quite likely that it was other slaves who were in a position to know what had happened. In this case, the church was able to persuade a slave member that his violent action was wrong, and elicit a powerful reformation. Similarly, as in the case of Jerry and Fanny at Tomahawk Church, slaves brought matters of difficulty between them to the church for resolution. Lacking other venues, the church was one of the few institutions capable of providing this kind of satisfactory resolution. Violence among slaves in the antebellum South was high and intra-slave violence over small slights and disputes appears to have been quite common.³⁷ All of the avenues available to slaves for settling disputes were informal and often lacked enforcement powers. Church discipline filled this void in some cases by providing a way for disputes to be settled without a resorting to violence.

Disciplining Marriage

Marriage was the clearest example of disputes among slaves about the nature of Baptist fellowship. Enslaved Baptists struggled with each other over the proper form of marriage, with some slaves pushing to make slave marriages fully monogamous and

³⁵ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, April 1828.

³⁶ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, December 1828.

³⁷ Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap, 2012), 226–33. Roth argues that intra-slave violence rose dramatically after the revolution and remained high through the Civil War. Roth attributes this rise in violence to displaced tensions within a hardened slave society.

indissoluble. The motivation for these slaves was at least in part an attempt to stabilize family life and insulate it in the face of sale and deportation. As the data from Scully demonstrates, slaves were charged with sexual offenses disproportionate to their numbers. While the most common offense whites were charged with in church discipline cases was drinking, for blacks it was offenses relating to marriage and cohabitation.³⁸ In addition, the vast majority of cases involving sex and marriage in Virginia Baptist churches involved enslaved blacks.³⁹ What explains this discrepancy? One part of this answer involves marriage patterns among slaves. At South Quay, members expelled “Ridley’s Joshua” for the crime of “taking a man’s wife.”⁴⁰ At Mill Swamp, a man identified as “Mrs. Clark’s Beck,” was “charged with leaving her husband.”⁴¹ Boarswamp expelled “Will belonging to Wm. Carter” for “having left his lawful wife.”⁴²

In all of these cases, the language makes clear that the act of leaving, or of dissolving the marriage, not marital infidelity, was the trigger that brought the matter to the attention of the church. The slaves in question were not, it would seem, attempting to hide infidelities. They were living in plain sight with a person other than their first spouse, or choosing not to live with that spouse. Historians going back to Herbert Gutman have argued that slaves often had liaisons before marriage that were not generally considered to be wrong within slave communities, and that, in addition, marriage was generally held by slaves to be dissolvable upon the consent of either

³⁸ See Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia*, 160–1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, October 1781.

⁴¹ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, September 1797.

⁴² VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, June 1793.

party.⁴³ We can see some evidence of the prevalence of both practices in church disciplinary cases, although these practices were contested rather than universal or unchanging among slaves.

Evidence that Baptist values came into conflict with less restrictive marriage, divorce and sexual norms among slaves, appears in many disciplinary proceedings. A slave woman, Daphney, was excluded from Beulah Church in 1825 “for wishing to have Mr. Harris’ Jim (who has forsaken his lawful wife) as her husband after denying at a previous meeting that Jim came to see her.”⁴⁴ The notation reveals several important facts about Daphney’s motivations and beliefs. First, she was not simply committing infidelity—she wanted to marry Jim. Because of this, it seems likely that she believed that his marriage had been dissolved and Jim should be free to marry again. Her earlier evasion on seeing Jim could be interpreted as guilt, but then why had she then later expressed a desire, possibly at her disciplinary case, to have Jim as her husband? More likely, she simply knew that the church members would disagree with her decision and had attempted to evade the matter until forced. Similarly, at Chesterfield, a slave named Will was excommunicated for “having left his lawful wife and taken up with another woman.” The notes added that he had been “dealt with agreeable to the gospel,” yet had “no appearance of a contrition for his crime.”⁴⁵ If Will lacked contrition, it was likely because he saw nothing wrong in leaving his previous wife and marrying another one.

⁴³ See Herbert George Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York [N.Y.]: Vintage, 1977), 197. For more recent treatments see Brenda E Stevenson, *Life in Black and White Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Brenda E Stevenson, “Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860,” in Carol Bleser, Ed. *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 103–25.

⁴⁴ VBHS, Beulah Baptist Church, September 1825.

⁴⁵ VBHS, Chesterfield Baptist Church, July 1793.

Fifteen years later, the church book recorded that “Pleasant, a black woman formerly belonging to Francis Carter, now to Edward Carter having taken another woman’s husband to be her own came before church, appeared to justify her conduct in so doing.”⁴⁶ The precise argument Pleasant made is lost, but it is clear that she believed her conduct had not been wrong.

At times, slaves simply chose to defy the church and expressed a willingness to be excommunicated rather than accept strictures on their marriage that they found alien and needless. One slave at South Quay, Bob, when confronted with evidence that he had left a previous wife and taken a new one, at first attempted to deny the charges and then later declared to the church meeting that he “never intended to attend conference again on that account and seemed abstinent.”⁴⁷ That slaves were willing to go so far in defying church authority, and therefore the authority of local whites, suggests the strength of their belief that their actions were defensible. Many Baptist slaves were not eager to engage white church members in arguments over marriage, but when confronted, stood their ground.

However, we can also see evidence of slaves holding disparate views on marriage and sexuality. While the expulsions of black Baptists over marriage norms certainly reflected a split in beliefs about the meaning of marriage between white and black Baptists, it also reflected a serious split within the black Baptist community between slaves who believed in enforcing Baptist norms in slave marriage and those who resisted this attempt. This should hardly be surprising. As waves of blacks converted to Christianity and joined churches, it makes sense that they contested the meaning of their

⁴⁶ VBHS, Chesterfield Baptist Church, June 1812.

⁴⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, September 1794.

conversion. Marriage became a chief venue for arguments about what being a Christian slave meant, and by what rules Christian slaves should abide.

When the white members of Boarswamp Church decided to appoint Frank as deacon, they had a particular purpose in mind. Frank's first job as deacon was to file a report on "the conduct of the black members."⁴⁸ Frank came back with a particular set of charges. He reported "some disorder which claims the attention of the church." The Clerk recorded that "Sister Effey belonging to Bro. James Binford cited to appear for "cohabitating with a man not being her lawful husband."⁴⁹ This was the only charge brought back by Frank, who had apparently been given discretion in his choice of charges and individuals to bring them against. While many cases never specified who brought the charge, in this case we know it to be the deacon. We furthermore know that Frank seems to have chosen this particular charge to bring. The details are unfortunately unclear on whether Sister Effey was, in fact, married, although the language suggests she might not have been. She "confessed the charge and said she was truly sorry for the same and that she had reason to hope that God had pardoned her sin." Effey was suspended to test her repentance and more than six months later was fully restored.⁵⁰

Similarly, at South Quay, an enslaved deacon, Ben of Copeland, charged "Sally of King of having taken up with another woman's husband."⁵¹ It was not only deacons who brought charges of infidelity. Sam of Ely, who was not a deacon, charged a slave, Hannah, for "having reproached the cause by unbecoming language of the members" as well as what may have been the original charge leading to his unbecoming language;

⁴⁸ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, November 1812.

⁴⁹ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, Ibid.

⁵⁰ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, January 1813, September 1813.

⁵¹ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, June 1813.

”having taken another woman’s husband.”⁵² At Mill Swamp, a slave named Tom was accused of “unclean actions” by another slave, Edy. The committee decided that the charges were untrue and expelled Edy for lying.⁵³ Nowhere in any church record that I examined could I find slaves charging other slaves with having run away or stolen anything from an owner. Thus, these cases demonstrate that some Baptist slaves were invested in enforcing forms of sexual morality among the enslaved membership while, comparatively, slaves were totally uninterested in enforcing church strictures on running away from and stealing from owners.

There are other examples in church records of slaves using church discipline to enforce marital and sexual codes of conduct in slave relationships. In 1792 at Mill Swamp Church, a slave named Betty was suspended “until she repents” for having been overtaken in the act of uncleanness and marrying a man without giving him knowledge of her pregnancy.”⁵⁴ The particular language of this case is interesting. While, on one hand, this was a relatively standard charge against a slave woman for immorality, the man she married was represented in the complaint as the victim, possibly suggesting that the man involved or someone connected to him was responsible for bringing the charge. The clerk did not usually mention a spouse as a wronged party in such cases, likely because in most cases the spouse was fully aware of the existence of a previous marriage and was not involved in the complaint.

Slave women also used church discipline to protect themselves against attack. In 1794, a slave named Sam was brought before Mill Swamp Church for “an attempt at

⁵² VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, December 1829.

⁵³ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, September 1791.

⁵⁴ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, September 1794.

unlawful cohabitation against the consent of a certain sister.”⁵⁵ Because of the phrase “against the consent,” the charge seems to describe an attempted rape against a female church member. The case reveals how female slaves sometimes used church discipline to exact at least some justice. Enslaved women generally had no access to the court system in such cases and involving slave owners could be both risky and futile. Although officially a slave woman could hope for nothing more than the expulsion of the offender, involving the large community in the case might have been useful. If a female slave could involve others besides an owner and other slaves in her protection; perhaps social pressure could be brought to bear. Evangelical discipline was a venue where slaves could appeal to groups other than their owners or slaves in their immediate community to other slaves and perhaps more importantly to other whites.

In an 1829 case at Beaverdam Church, Ned, a slave member, was expelled “for continuing to beat his wife and hold another.” This charge may have been brought by Ned’s wife, or someone connected with her and may have been able to serve similar purposes to the previous case. Church discipline, despite its limits, was a way for slaves to access a form of legal system and reach out to a wider community.⁵⁶ The proceedings could, at the very least, have provided slaves lacking access to courts with the psychic benefits of seeing justice done in at least one forum. Disputes which otherwise may have led to violence could, thus, be settled without resort to force. Church discipline could also act to reform the behavior of the offender. A slave wishing to be readmitted to the church would, at the very least, need to stop committing the original offense. Perhaps more

⁵⁵ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, October 1794.

⁵⁶ Stephanie McCurry writes of similar uses of church disciplinary systems in South Carolina in *Masters of Small Worlds*, 171–208. My thoughts on the role of church discipline within the wider community are influenced by her arguments.

important were the effects a church judgment might have on community opinion and action, both black and white. A censure from the church might have the power to shame a master, even one who was not a church member, into taking action.

However, at other times, church discipline initiated by slaves seems to have been driven by more than attempts to protect particular individuals. Instead, these cases overwhelmingly involved disputes about sexuality and marriage and its meaning and purpose in slave communities. These conflicts reveal a great deal about the disputes that rapid evangelization of slaves caused within slave communities. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a time of profound disruption in the lives of Virginian slaves. In the Chesapeake region, the shift from tobacco, a labor-intensive crop, to wheat and other less intensive crops resulted in a labor surplus. At the same time, the expansion of cotton throughout the Southwest and sugar in Louisiana created an enormous demand for slaves in these regions. The large labor forces of planters in Virginia became a source of wealth as slave prices rose. The end result of all of these factors was a massive forced relocation of slaves from Virginia, either through sale or travel with owners who themselves migrated. Within the dense network of Virginia slave connections, slaves were especially vulnerable as the stability of families often relied on more than one owner. The death or business decision of a neighboring planter could easily result in the sale and removal of a slave's spouse, children or extended family.

The forced separation of families shows up directly and revealingly in the disciplinary records of Baptist churches. These records suggest that conflict among slaves about marriages was directly linked to forced migration, and reflected efforts by slaves to force Baptist churches to grapple with the resulting implications and the contradictions

between the religious precepts of white Virginia Baptists and their commitment to slavery. At Mill Swamp in 1792, Bob was “accused of taking to himself a second wife, while the first is living, she being separated to a great distance by her master.”⁵⁷ Normally, the taking of a second wife would have been cause for expulsion by itself. The circumstances, however, gave white church members pause. The clerk recorded that “after some debate the matter is postponed to a conference in course.”⁵⁸ In June of 1795, almost three years later, the members of Mill Swamp took up the problem of Bob again, but “after a long debate upon the same the business was postponed till conference in course.”⁵⁹ In the end, Bob was never reinstated but no explanation was offered. Similar cases appeared in several other church minute books.

At Boarswamp Church, a slave named Aggy was excluded “for taking a second husband while her first one was living.” She was subsequently restored because it had “been shown that she was justifiable for thus acting.”⁶⁰ Generally, Baptist churches might allow separations, as we have seen in cases of abuse or spousal neglect, but not remarriage. Almost certainly the reason the Boarswamp members felt that Aggy was justified in taking a new husband was because her first one had been sold away. It is revealing that in both cases the members decided the individual case while avoiding coming to a conclusion on the problem of slaves whose partners had been sold abroad. The language makes it fairly clear that the problem had been discussed in the church meeting, but that the members had been unable to come to a consensus.

⁵⁷ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, September 1792.

⁵⁸ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, Ibid.

⁵⁹ VBHS, Mill Swamp Baptist Church, June 1795.

⁶⁰ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, November 1813.

White Baptists were structurally incapable of reaching a conclusion on the issue of slave marriage and the breakup of slave families through sale. They believed in a series of contradictory principles that made any decision impossible. Whatever else white Baptists believed about slaves, they believed, that they were fully human and fully capable of salvation. Slaves thus needed to be held to the standards expected of Christians. However, Virginia Baptists became increasingly comfortable with slavery and by the nineteenth century had fully embraced the institution. They had also largely accepted the sale of slaves. Earlier in the 18th century, their feelings were more mixed on slave sales. In the early 1770s, at Metherrin Church in Lunenburg County, two black church members accused a white member, Rebekah Johnson, “of the sin of anger and unchristian language, also offering something like parting of a black brother and sister (man and wife.)”⁶¹ Rebekah Johnson owned two slaves, Dick and Esther, who were presumably the slave couple. While it is unclear what “offering” meant, the church was willing to consider the possibility, at least, that separating a slave husband and wife was a sin. In the end, however, they were unwilling even at this early date to actually condemn selling slaves. The church records recorded that “nothing was done for special reasons.”⁶² No further such cases were taken up at Metherrin or any other churches in my sample. It is possible that many Virginia Baptists may have continued to privately and individually disapprove of the separation of slave families through sale but they did not consider it to be a proper subject for church discipline.⁶³

⁶¹ VBHS, Metherrin Baptist Church 1773.

⁶² VBHS, Metherrin Baptist Church, Ibid.

⁶³ For a fuller discussion of white evangelicals in Virginia and slave marriage and sale, see Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 84–6, 240.

It would have been difficult for white Baptists to address these issues more directly. The sale of slaves to the Southwest was a lucrative part of the economy of Virginia. Church records recorded numerous sales of slaves, and they generally did so with a neutral tone. The church clerk at Boarswamp wrote, “Minor belonging to Jacob Jarvis of Cumberland County and a member of this church was carried away by his master (without a letter of dismissal) out of our knowledge or hearing and according to a well-grounded report in the disorder of eloping from master a considerable length of time until he was taken.”⁶⁴ At South Quay, a slave named Andrew was “charged with uncommon laziness, which renders him an unfaithful servant.”⁶⁵ In October, the clerk noted that Andrew had been sold away.⁶⁶ Of course in most cases in which the owner did not belong to the church, churches had little power. But even in cases in which the owner did belong to the church they held back from censuring him.

If the white leadership of Virginia Baptist churches accepted the sale of slaves, this acceptance still posed problems. How could slaves be held responsible for their actions if they lacked the ability to control their location and family life? At South Quay, the problem was explicitly acknowledged. After Jake, a slave member of South Quay had been charged with “having left and forsaken his wife,” the members agreed to ask the association “How far is the marriage of slaves to be deemed obligatory in the administration of church discipline?”⁶⁷ The question cut to the heart of the problem. Slave marriages, unlike the marriages of white members, were not recognized by the law and enjoyed no legal protection. Nevertheless, churches were committed to recognizing

⁶⁴ VBHS, Boarswamp Baptist Church, May 1812.

⁶⁵ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, September 1808.

⁶⁶ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, October 1808.

⁶⁷ VBHS, South Quay Baptist Church, August 1817.

the validity of slave marriages. To not do so would fail to recognize the essential humanity of slaves. This proved an impossible contradiction to resolve for the white members of Virginia Baptist churches.

The members of Beulah Church acknowledged the problem in addressing a query from a free black member: “Bro Blackhead having taken a woman for his wife in the time of his bondage and they both being now free, the Church’s advice to him for his safety and comfort is to comply with the form of matrimony.”⁶⁸ But, of course, Virginia Baptist churches already did believe that slaves were complying with the spirit of matrimony—otherwise why spend so much church time engaged in the project of attempting to enforce codes of marriage and divorce among slaves? Their advice to Blackhead was, thus, an acknowledgement of the limits of church power, not just over the secular world, but also over the secular lives of their own members. Lacking solutions to the problem, Baptist churches opted for ad hoc fixes. As we have seen, they often decided to consider slaves sold away from their spouses as effectively dead to them. In many more cases, churches simply avoided the issue by overlooking remarriages of separated slaves.⁶⁹

Slaves who had remarried and defended these remarriages forced white Baptists to confront these questions. Discerning the motivations of slaves is a nearly impossible task. However, we can look at the results of their actions and attempt some guesses. Some slaves clearly attempted to use the church to enforce exclusive and single marriage and prohibit divorce. As we have seen, they might have been motivated by any number of factors, including a desire to regularize slave family life, protect women from abuse, or

⁶⁸ VBHS, Beulah Baptist Church, August 22, 1788.

⁶⁹ See Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 84–6 for his discussion of disciplinary cases involving the break up of slave marriage through sale in evangelical churches and the reaction of evangelical whites to such cases.

enforce what slave men saw as their prerogatives. Some slaves resisted these efforts at changing marriage norms, preferring a system that separation and remarriage at the will of either spouse. The slaves who accepted Baptist marriage norms and attempted to implement them through church discipline forced white Baptists into confronting awkward questions about slavery and Christianity. If Christian slaves believed their marriages to be indissoluble except by death, then what of an owner who would violate that bond, or a legal regime which did not recognize slave marriages as valid? White Virginia Baptists had no answers to these questions because they fully committed both to viewing slaves as members of their Christian community and also viewing them as property. It was possible to combine these two ideas through a philosophy of benevolent paternalism, but by making an issue of marriage dissolution, Baptist slaves exposed the inconsistency of the paternalistic argument.

White Baptists were aware of the problem of slave marriage and the forced deportation of slaves away from family. Most of the time, they preferred to simply not acknowledge it. However, by the beginning of the Civil War, some evangelical leaders began to argue that the time had come to reform the institution. When white churchmen argued that marriage among slaves must be protected, to some extent they were responding to what they had heard in their churches from slaves forcibly separated from their families.⁷⁰ The effort did not produce results, nor could it have. Slaves who attempted to buttress families through a commitment to monogamy found few legal protections, nor did they likely believe that they would. Any success they found in persuading white Baptists and evangelicals of the moral wrong of separation of families

⁷⁰ See Irons, p. 240.

was tenuous. Economic forces were far more powerful than the moral forces that black Virginia Baptists were able to bring to bear.

Disputes between white and black Baptists over discipline were real, but just as important were the disputes within the black Baptist community. These disputes centered on issues involving sexuality, divorce, and marriage. This chapter has highlighted the dangers of viewing black Baptists as a unified block within the Baptist church. The next chapter allows us to see these disputes more directly and gives us greater insight into the deacons who saw themselves as the leaders of the black Baptist community and their struggles to act as such.

CHAPTER FOUR: Black Deacons in the First Baptist Church of Richmond

Before emigrating from Richmond to Liberia in 1819, Lot Cary, a free black deacon and preacher of the First Baptist Church, gave a farewell sermon in Richmond. No full transcript of the sermon survives, but the biography in the *Latter Day Luminary*, the journal of the American Colonization Society, under whose auspices Cary was emigrating, reported that he said

I am about to leave you and expect to see your faces no more. I long to preach to the poor Africans the way of life and salvation. I don't know what may befall me, whether I may find a grave in the ocean, or among the savage men, or more savage wild beasts on the Coast of Africa; nor am I anxious what may become of me. I feel it my duty to go; and I very much fear that many of those who preach the Gospel in this country, will blush when the Saviour calls them to give an account of their labors in His cause,¹

Despite the tone of this farewell, evangelism alone cannot explain why Cary would leave America. As a man who preached to slaves in Richmond and the surrounding areas, he would have been acutely aware that there were many souls to be saved without crossing any oceans. Later, in reply to a Baptist minister who asked him why he would quit “a station of so much comfort and usefulness” for Africa, Cary revealed a more terrestrial purpose:

“I am an African, and in this country, however meritorious my conduct, and respectable my character, I cannot receive the credit due to either. I wish to go to a country where I shall be estimated by my merits, not by my complexion; and I feel bound to labor for my suffering race.”²

¹ “Biography: The Rev. Lott Cary,” *The Latter Day Luminary (1818-1825)*, December 1, 1825; 6, 12.

² Ibid.

Cary would find that although Liberia allowed him to fulfill his leadership ambitions, he could not avoid dealing with paternalistic whites. Cary would continue to chafe against the paternalism of the American Colonization Society toward black colonists in Liberia. This struggle was one for which his work as a black deacon in the white-dominated First Baptist Church of Richmond, had prepared him. His decision to emigrate, while couched as a fundamental break with America, is in fact quite consistent with the ambitions and career trajectories of his cohort of deacons in Richmond.

In this chapter, I will reconstruct the worldviews of the deacons of First Baptist Church as they struggled with the contradictions of aspiring to black leadership in white-dominated institutions. While the previous chapter explored how black Baptists related to the discipline system in biracial Virginia Churches, this chapter looks more closely at the backgrounds and motivations of the black deacons who played a key role in these churches. I do so by looking closely at one small group of black deacons, including Cary, who worshipped in the First Baptist Church of Richmond from roughly 1807 to 1834. On the most general level, black deacons carved out their careers by acting as intermediaries between the white men who controlled biracial churches and the slave members of these churches. Whites in the First Baptist Church needed to find black intermediaries who they believed they could trust, but who they also believed could supervise, and be seen as legitimate by, the growing black membership of the church. In the scope of his ambitions, Cary was certainly exceptional, but he was very much a product of Richmond and its free black culture, as well as of his interactions with Richmond whites. A large amount of responsibility for the black members of First Baptist

Church rested with black deacons appointed by the white male membership. These deacons formed a small, but important, core of black leadership in the church.

Black deacons used their positions to fulfill two very different roles in Richmond. They were intermediaries between the white male leadership of the church and the much more numerous black congregation of slave and free black men and women. However, they also appeared to aspire to a position of leadership, not only over black church members, but also within the larger black community, both free and slave. These dual roles sometimes were in tension with each other. The black leadership of the church was not, demographically, reflective of black membership as a whole.³ Even when compared to the free black population of Richmond, deacons were better educated, more highly skilled, and wealthier than most free blacks in the city. Several of them immigrated to Liberia in the 1820s, producing documents that give us a window into how they viewed their place in Richmond as well as the larger world of free blacks in America. This evidence suggests that black deacons in Richmond were connected to currents of thought that travelled throughout the black Atlantic world. The church allowed black deacons to have a leadership role within the black community of Richmond. Despite this, these deacons were constrained by the slave system of Virginia. Without white patronage, black religious leaders were unable to operate openly.

³ The annual tally of members sometimes broke down the raw number of members into blacks and whites, but never gave numbers of free blacks and slaves. The sample of converts I took for the entire year of 1831 shows 143 slaves admitted to 73 free blacks. This may not be representative of the overall numbers, but it does suggest that there probably were a larger number of slaves, and that the slave population in the church probably grew faster than the free black population during the period this chapter studies. VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, 1831.

Black Deacons as Intermediaries

As the number of black members of First Baptist grew in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, white members began to struggle with how to respond to the large numbers of black members joining the church. Increasingly, they seem to have believed they could not adequately supervise black members, because they were unlikely to know them, either personally or by reputation. Such anxieties were both racial and urban in nature, and led white church members to rely increasingly on black deacons to police black church members. This intermediary role was a powerful one. In theory, black deacons were fully subordinate to the white church structure, but in practice the factors that made them necessary to white church members allowed them to operate with considerable autonomy.

Church records do not record the factors that went into the selection of black deacons by white members, but familiarity seems to have been a key element. White members knew very little about the vast majority of black church members. As we shall see, they largely relied on free black deacons to make judgments about the suitability of other blacks for church membership. Blacks in Richmond were often transient. Sometimes this mobility was by choice, as in the case of free black laborers who might go elsewhere if conditions seemed better. Sometimes it was not, in the case of slaves who were moved in and out of the city as a result of the needs of their owners, or as the result of permanent sale away from Virginia.⁴

⁴ For a broader discussion of the problem of authenticity for 19th century Americans see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (Yale Historical Publications) (Yale University Press, 1986). Although the situation in Richmond was complicated by race, I believe Halttunen's analysis is still helpful for its insight into the anxieties of Americans in urban spaces.

For the white leadership of the church, the problem of keeping track of black members was compounded by the sheer numbers of slaves and free blacks who joined the church in the early nineteenth century.⁵ Unfortunately, the roll books for First Baptist have not survived and membership was not broken down by race in yearly tallies until 1836, when a church census recorded 295 white members and 1,414 black members. The ratio of white to black members had increased dramatically to this point, and would continue to increase until the formal creation of a separate First African Baptist Church in 1841. While exact numbers cannot be reconstructed for earlier periods, the church already had a substantial black majority by 1825, when its membership reached 1,000.⁶ In the next decade, the number increased dramatically. In a postwar memoir, Robert Ryland, the white pastor of the First African Church remarked of the original First Baptist, “A peculiar feature in the congregation, was the great increase of its colored members.”⁷ The “peculiarity” of this growth was emphasized by the fact that the black proportion of membership in the church increased despite the proportion of both free blacks and slaves in Richmond remaining relatively constant from 1810 to 1840.⁸

The solution for white church leaders to a growing body of black members about whom they knew little was to appoint black deacons who, they hoped, would serve their interests as their representatives. The office of “colored deacon” already existed by 1825

⁵ By contrast, rural areas had more even numbers of blacks and whites in the church. See Chapter 2.

⁶ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond. Any attempt at greater precision is problematic. White membership probably did not grow substantially between 1825 and 1836. Although there were large numbers of conversions of white members in this period, the creation of two new Baptist churches may have kept membership from increasing too dramatically by siphoning away members. However, there is no evidence to suggest that white membership was halved in ten years. Instead the years for which we do possess records show white membership slightly increasing. Assuming a substantial black majority by 1825 seems safe.

⁷ Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia By the Pastor,” accessed at Baptist History Homepage, <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/va.fabc.1.html>.

⁸ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, 1810-1840.

at First Baptist Church. Deacons appear in the records in several contexts. Black deacons were charged with collecting donations. These amounts could be substantial. In 1827, a committee reported that they believed they could raise \$300 from the black membership, and that “many of the slaves are willing and able to contribute their mites also.” In addition to collecting money, the deacons of First Baptist Church were responsible for notifying members to attend meetings when there were charges against them, as deacons did at most congregations. However, at First Baptist Church, deacons took on roles of far greater responsibility due to the sheer number of blacks in the church. Deacons were solely responsible for certain matters of discipline, and in practice controlled the admission of new black converts to the church.

The office of deacon was not the same as the position of preacher. Deacons were tasked only with monitoring church members, not preaching to them. The First Baptist Church did authorize some blacks to preach and several deacons were given permission to preach, but there was little direct overlap between the offices. Although Cary and Teague acted as both deacons and preachers, of the fifteen deacons appointed between 1824 and 1832 only one, William Reynolds, was also licensed by the church to preach. The lack of overlap between the roles of deacon and preacher helps to highlight the differences in these roles. White church members were careful about which blacks they licensed to preach. Between 1824 and 1832, five blacks who applied for preaching certificates were rejected by the church at the recommendation of a committee of white church leaders appointed to examine blacks who wished to preach, and five were licensed.⁹ White members saw preaching as a position of power, but they believed the

⁹ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond.

qualifications for serving as a preacher and as a deacon were fundamentally different.

White Baptists expected black preachers to be men who would not preach against slavery or espouse other dangerous doctrines, but they also likely expected them to be able to preach orthodox Baptist doctrine and to do so effectively, bringing in converts. On the other hand, they expected black deacons to perform a different role, as mediators between white members and the large black majority of the First Baptist Church. To highlight the difference, at least one slave served as preacher, while likely none served as deacons.

The anxieties of white members about the responsibilities and power of black deacons give us crucial insight into the roles these deacons performed. A committee was appointed by the church in March 1827 to ascertain “what has been the course pursued by the colored members who were appointed to hear differences between the colored members and whether they had exceeded their authority conferred on them by this church.”¹⁰ In April 1827, in response to their belief that black deacons lacked sufficient guidance, the church committee laid out the roles they expected deacons to perform. This is fortunate for historians, as otherwise much of the work of black deacons does not appear in the church records.

First, the report reveals the extent to which white church leaders depended on black deacons to manage the growing black membership of First Baptist Church. Unlike in other churches, where deacons were supposed to individually mediate between white leaders and black members, the deacons in First Baptist did not simply act as individuals but as a committee in matters of discipline. The report made it clear that black deacons were meeting together to act on disciplinary cases. It also indicated that the deacons

¹⁰ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, March 20, 1827.

“have been in the habit of calling others than those appointed by the church to sit with them in case of grievances.” This passage suggests that black deacons were operating a parallel discipline system, which although subservient to that of the main church, operated autonomously in many discipline cases as well as making decisions involving the admission of members to the church. These decisions were subject to the ratification of the entire church body, but the report suggests that many white members believed this oversight was limited.

The report testified to the anxiety of white church leaders over the power black deacons exerted in matters involving the black membership. While dependent on black deacons to manage the influx of new and unknown black members, white leaders were concerned that the black deacons had taken on responsibilities beyond their mandate. They were, moreover, concerned that the role they had designed for black deacons would lead to greater autonomy for the growing black membership as a whole. White members, however, did not want to assume responsibility for routine discipline and surveillance of the large black membership of First Baptist Church. The report tried to regularize the duties of black deacons, and showed concern that in some instances they had overstepped their bounds, but it did not attempt to dismantle the parallel structure in which black deacons met separately, evaluating disciplinary cases and potential converts.

One way that the white leadership attempted to establish clear limits to the authority of deacons was by delineating the types of cases deacons would be allowed to decide. First, the committee emphasized the role of black deacons in “private grievances between any of the colored members.”¹¹ “Private grievances” was a category that

¹¹ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, April 17, 1827.

encompassed disputes among members that did not involve the commission of any great sins. As previous chapters discussed, churches were concerned with settling these disputes to avoid disharmony in the church. Private grievances referred to disputes between members. Reconciliation, not punishment, was the ultimate goal in such cases—only if that was “found to be impossible” were deacons instructed to “report it to the church.”¹²

However, black deacons were also given a large role in the handling of other discipline cases. While deacons in most churches, white and black, were supposed to keep a particular watch for members who might have strayed into sin, First Baptist gave black deacons a much-expanded role in judging these cases. This delegation of oversight was likely because white members felt themselves unable to adequately supervise the large and mobile black membership of the church. The black deacons were instructed that “it shall be their duty to make diligent inquiries into all reports which may be in circulation prejudicial to the Christian character of any colored member or members and if found to be true in whole or in part, report it to the church.”¹³ Although this mandate left the power to expel members solely in the hands of the regular church disciplinary system, it also formalized the role of black deacons as gatekeepers to the discipline system and gave them the power to dismiss cases.

White members never intended to give deacons exclusive power to determine which cases came before the church, and they retained the ability to report black members for breaches of discipline. In September 1828, the clerk of First Baptist wrote in the minutes that “Brother Myers informed the church that on Saturday night last about 11

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

o clock, he found Henry, the property of Major Gibbon in a room with three other men, at a table with cards, dice and money upon it.”¹⁴ White members were not prepared to give up their ability to exercise discipline against black members, nor did a parallel structure indicate a philosophical preference for black deacons to have authority over the black segments of the congregation. Rather, it seems to have reflected white concerns about their ability to successfully monitor black Baptists in Richmond.

By empowering deacons, the white leadership seems to have attempted to limit the extent to which these meetings operated as a parallel discipline system. This limitation on the authority of black members was by design. The initial complaint that black deacons had “been in the habit of calling others than those appointed by the church to sit with them in case of grievances,” suggests that some black members wanted to hold meetings to admit and discipline church members that would have functioned the same as the larger quarterly meetings, with all members welcome to participate and vote.¹⁵ The white membership, instead, envisioned the meetings of the black deacons as serving a gatekeeping purpose. In this vision, black deacons would simply meet together to examine candidates and small matters of discipline and make recommendations to the full church meeting, presumably with only black deacons allowed to participate.

At least some other black members, however, were apparently unwilling to be excluded from the deliberations of the deacons. The complaint noted that “others not invited have claimed a right to sit and vote.”¹⁶ It is unclear whether the deacons also wished to turn these meetings into disciplinary meetings for the black members of the

¹⁴ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, September 18, 1829.

¹⁵ Ibid, April 10, 1827.

¹⁶ Ibid, April 10, 1827.

church, or instead agreed with the more limited role envisioned by white leaders. When questioned by white church members about the participation of other blacks in the meetings, they claimed that “they did not know they were authorized to refuse them.”¹⁷

The clearest indication that white leaders’ concerns over black autonomy were tempered by their inability to manage new black membership appears in another directive of the report, concerning the process by which the church would accept new black members. Of the deacons, the committee decided that

“it shall also be their duty whenever they know that any colored person or persons wish to join the church, to notify the colored members of the church to attend a meeting for the purpose of hearing their experience... at which meeting any member may object to the candidate, and if such objection is reasonable, such person shall not be recommended to the church until the objection is removed.”

This new process gave the black membership as a whole, not just the deacons, the ability to veto new black members to the church and the procedure that was laid out for doing so was more or less identical to that of regular church conferences which adjudicated white applicants for membership.

Baptist ideas of fellowship meant that giving the black membership as a whole the power to admit new members implied that they were, in some respects, a separate church community. It is important to note that, as in the church disciplinary process as a whole, individual members did not have vetoes. The nature of Baptist ideas of church fellowship insisted that all members accept each other. Lodging an objection against a prospective member without what other members considered to be just cause, and then refusing to back down from that objection when confronted, was behavior which could lead to the expulsion of the objecting member. Objections to membership had to be removed, either

¹⁷ Ibid, April 10, 1827.

through agreement, or the expulsion of a member who continued to obstinately object. Presumably white members handed over this process to black members of the church, because they believed that they would be unable to know the character and judge the sincerity of the conversions of prospective black converts. However, in so doing they undermined much of their earlier attempt to formalize the role of the black deacons as gatekeepers who monitored the black membership, while still allowing the white members of the church to continue to supervise discipline over black members. The problem for white members that this contradiction illustrates was that the reasons they needed black deacons in the first place made it difficult to control them, and thus, black members of the church as a whole. Asserting the primacy of the white church through various regulations could not allow white church leaders to effectively monitor the black membership without relying almost exclusively on black deacons. This reliance, as the report showed, came with its own problems for white members.

The role of black deacons, in the view of the white members who appointed them, was to act as arms of the church among black members. This reflected the fears of white members that they lacked knowledge of the black community and were ill equipped to supervise them. In theory, the rules laid out by the 1827 committee regularized and codified the nature of the relationship between black deacons and the white-run church government. However, the very need for the committee's report suggested deep unease among white members about the role given to black deacons. The report did little to end this underlying tension. It hardly could have, unless the white leadership had been willing, or felt themselves able, to supervise the black membership directly.

Events elsewhere in Virginia would have important effects on the First Baptist Church. In August of 1831, in the midst of a large revival throughout south and central Virginia, a group of slaves in Southampton County, Virginia staged a violent attack on whites in the county. Moving from plantation to plantation, the group of slaves killed fifty-five whites. Local whites were eventually able to organize and easily defeat the poorly equipped slaves. The reprisals undoubtedly claimed more lives than the revolt itself. As well as the slaves convicted in ad hoc courts, some of whom were likely not participants in the rebellion, many other slaves were simply killed out of hand by vengeful whites. For an event so heavily studied, the Turner Rebellion remains a shadowy episode. Although contemporaries and modern historians alike ascribed religious motivations to the revolt, the actual goals and motives of the rebels remain unknown and probably unknowable.

Richmond Baptists seem to have been far more concerned with the reaction of whites to the revolt than with the revolt itself. It was not mentioned or even alluded to in the minutes of First Baptist Church until September 15th, and then only in terms of the backlash caused by the widespread belief of Virginia whites that evangelical churches were to blame for the Turner revolt. This backlash was particularly problematic for Richmond Baptists because it mostly targeted the spiritual leadership of blacks either inside or outside official churches.¹⁸ The Virginia legislature passed laws in the spring of 1832 prohibiting blacks from preaching or having religious meetings without whites present. On September 15th, the minutes referred rather cryptically to “Considerable difficulty having arisen in reference to exercising discipline among the colored members

¹⁸ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008), 133–38.

of the church because of the laws of the commonwealth.”¹⁹ The reference was almost certainly to the meetings of the black deacons that, while not yet illegal under state law, had become dangerous in the prevailing climate of fear and suspicion. As well as curtailing meetings of deacons, the church preceded to revoke the preaching credentials of blacks. The minutes were clear that this was done to comply with the law, rather than their own beliefs, “there being an impossibility from the nature of the laws of the land for our coloured brethren to exercise public gifts.”²⁰ The Virginia legislature had not yet met, so either the reference was to a city ordinance or to a belief that such preaching would be deemed illegal in the near future. Combined, these actions suggest that the white members of First Baptist church feared that the exercise of black spiritual power, either through deacons or preaching, would be perceived as dangerous by other white Richmonders. The language, however, suggested that white members did not share these fears. There were no further mentions of the after effects of Turner’s Revolt for the remainder of the year.

Despite a political climate that frowned on black church leadership, the problem for white leaders of monitoring the black membership remained. To replace meetings of deacons, the church’s white leadership decided in the spring of 1832 that “five of the most discrete coloured members of the church, any two of whom may act, be appointed to investigate any matter of immoral conduct on the part of the colored members of this church and make report to the church.”²¹ In the end, the deacons who were appointed to conduct these investigations were essentially the same black members who had

¹⁹ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, September 15, 1831.

²⁰ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, September 15, 1831.

²¹ VBHS, April 7, 1832.

previously acted as deacons.²² The new system raised the possibility that the black deacons might, as before, continue to hold meetings—even if it did not explicitly provide for them. In fact, black deacons did hold meetings. In February 1834, the members decided to buy a book, which does not survive, to record discipline of black members, a strong indication that deacons were again meeting, although perhaps along with white members.

Whether or not there was an intention of increasing white control, there is evidence to suggest that white members' attendance of these disciplinary meetings was spotty. In 1835, the church adopted the resolutions of a committee that suggested,

that it is desirable that members should be appointed in accordance with the act of the assembly of this state in 1832-1833...whose duty it shall be to be present at all meetings for colored disciple [sic] and to promote in such methods as they find practicable scriptural instruction and edification of the colored members of the church.²³

The implication of this resolution was that white attendance at these meetings had been irregular, and that white members believed that as a result black members of the church were not being properly instructed and guided.

Black deacons seem to have largely dealt with finding and interviewing witnesses and accusers, insulating white members from much of the intimate and personal aspects of the disciplinary process. For example, in an 1835 conference meeting, white members heard a case involving a black member, Richard Vaughan, who was appealing his exclusion from the church in 1832. Despite the control of the proceedings by white leaders, Vaughan was exonerated based on “corroborating testimony from the colored

²² VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, 1832.

²³ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, January 18, 1835.

deacons going to proves [sic] his innocency and the error the church had fallen into in the reception of testimony against him at his exclusion”²⁴ The motivating factor behind Vaughan’s rehabilitation seems to have been the advocacy of black deacons, buttressed by their particular knowledge of the case. Although the Turner Revolt and the reaction to it interrupted the process by which black deacons acted as intermediaries, the disruption was temporary. Black deacons quickly took up their old duties in only slightly modified form. The white memberships need for black deacons ultimately trumped legal considerations and concerns over the power this intermediary gave deacons.

Who Were Black Deacons?

To find what they supposed to be suitable deacons, white leaders in First Baptist Church turned to blacks they already knew, either personally or by reputation. For the most part, these needs limited their choice to free blacks who had extensive dealings with whites in Richmond: tradesmen and merchants. While the majority of free blacks in Richmond worked as unskilled laborers, deacons were, with only a few exceptions, skilled workers. These black deacons were not at all typical of the black membership of First Baptist Church. The qualifications that made them ideal intermediaries in the eyes of white Richmond Baptists meant that they formed an elite group. This status was augmented by their role as deacons, but not created out of it. While their wealth was modest compared to whites, black deacons led lives far more economically secure than those of most black church members and of free blacks in Richmond more generally.

²⁴ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, April 1, 1835.

Fifteen men served as deacons for the black portion of First Baptist Church between 1825 and 1834.²⁵ All of the deacons were likely free. Certainly, none were identified as slaves, although it is impossible to be completely certain in the case of six of the fifteen deacons who could not be found in census lists or Liberian emigration records.²⁶ However, the record books generally, but not uniformly, noted the owners of slaves listed in the records, so while it is possible a few deacons could have been slaves, it is unlikely. Of the six of these men whose occupations can be identified, only one was a laborer. The other five were either skilled tradesman or merchants.²⁷ Their ranks included a shoemaker, a cupper and leacher, a shopkeeper, a grocer, and a saddler and harness maker. In a city where most free blacks worked as unskilled laborers, these men occupied a spot several rungs up the occupational ladder. In addition, all of these positions would have put these men in regular contact with whites as part of their business dealings.²⁸ Black tradesmen and shopkeepers often needed to enter into long-term and repeated arrangements, often involving credit. The free black population in Richmond was large but not wealthy, and most tradesmen probably did substantial

²⁵ This sample does not include Cary and Teague who feature prominently in this chapter. They are not included because the records for First Baptist before 1825 do not survive.

²⁶ Tracking free blacks in Richmond is difficult. There were no city directories published in Richmond during this period and most of the city's records were destroyed by fire at the close of the Civil War. Census records present their own problems. Free blacks were probably more likely than whites to be missed in the census. They might more often live behind houses or in narrow alleys. They also more often lived in non-nuclear households, meaning we may not be able to identify them even if they were recorded in the census. To add to the problem, many free blacks in Virginia moved during the 1820s and 30s, often to cities in the North. None of the deacons were ever identified in church records as being owned by someone, which was standard information given about slave members.

²⁸ To be sure, laborers also dealt with whites, but under different terms. While many worked under the supervision of white foremen, these relationships were probably usually brief in nature. Furthermore, unskilled labor was generally directly supervised, limiting the need for long term trust or contractual arrangements.

amounts of business with whites. Some free black shopkeepers sold mainly to blacks, but even they would have needed to receive goods from white suppliers.

Name	Year Appointed	Occupation	Went to Liberia?	Birthdate	Further Notes
Gilbert Hunt	1825	Blacksmith	1829 on <i>Harriet</i> . Returned next year.	1784	
Alex Henderson	1825	Not Known	1829 on <i>Harriet</i>	1788	
William Reynolds	1825	Not Known	No	1795-1806	Reappointed as supervisor in 1832
Hembor Thomkins	1825	Not Known	No	Unknown	Died in 1820s.
Edlow Baker	1827	Copper and Leacher	In 1849	1799	
R. Dye	1827	Not Known	No	Unknown	Dies by October 1828
Isham Ellis	1827	Shoemaker	No	1795	
A. Green	1827	Laborer	No	1788	
Randolph Morris	1827	Not Known	No	Unknown	Given Letter of Dismissal in 1828.
Nathan Richardson	1827	Not Known	No	Unknown	
Robert Spriggs	1827	Grocer	No	1795	Census records he was literate
John Taylor	1827	Not Known	No	Unknown	Suspended from Deacon responsibilities in 1830.
Simon Bailey	1831	Not Known		Before 1785	Reappointed as supervisor in 1832

William Caswell	1831	Shopkeeper		1781-1794	Reappointed in 1832
N. Mabbhus	1831	Not Known		Unknown	Reappointed in 1832

Table 5: Black Deacons at First Baptist Church Appointed From 1824-1832²⁹

Black deacons were generally wealthier than most free blacks in Richmond. Isham Ellis, a shoemaker, had his property assessed at \$2,500 for the 1850 census. Robert Spriggs's was valued more modestly at \$900. For both of these men, these sums likely indicate that they owned their land in Richmond, as did both Cary and Collin Teague. Although these men had gained a level of prosperity that put them on a far surer economic footing than the vast majority of free blacks in Richmond, most of them had relatively modest holdings and were not wealthy by the standards of white Richmonders.

In part, free blacks' economic prospects were limited by their struggles to gain and maintain autonomy for themselves and their families in the context of a slave society. William Crane, a white member of First Baptist Church, mentioned that both Cary and Teague "both possessed but little," as they had "paid large sums for their families," meaning that they had married women who were slaves. Thus, their children had also been slaves, and in order to free them they had bought them from their owners. Collin Teague and Lott Cary were born as slaves, and even those deacons not born as slaves were likely to be closely connected to the slave community, often directly through their wives and children.

Of the six deacons who appear in census records, three had people listed as slaves living in their households. Simon Bailey was living with a free black woman, probably his wife, and another free colored male between ten and twenty-three years old. Also in

²⁹ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, 1824-32.

Bailey's household were three people listed as slaves, one male under ten years old and two females who were between ten and twenty-three years old. There are two likely explanations for these slaves living in the household of a free black man.³⁰ They were most likely children of Bailey, his wife, or their children together. Either the children were still owned by their original master, but living with Bailey, or, more likely, Bailey had bought them himself. A law passed in 1806 required all slaves freed after May 1 in that year to leave Virginia within a year or be reenslaved. The law allowed free blacks to petition to the general assembly to stay in the state, however. As a result, the assembly was flooded with petitions many of which were granted. In practice, few freed slaves were ever actually reenslaved in Virginia and the law was changed in 1815 to allow county courts to grant exemptions to the law.³¹ Although the law was easily circumventable, some parents who had bought children chose to simply legally own them rather than freeing them and risking their reenslavement.

Two other free black deacons had slaves in their household. Robert Spriggs, a grocer, had three enslaved people listed in his household; one female under ten years old, one woman aged between twenty-four and thirty-five, and one woman over fifty-five, as well as a free woman who was between twenty-four to thirty-five years old, a free boy under ten years old and a free man who was thirty-six to fifty-four years old—the last probably being Spriggs himself. The presence of the woman over fifty-five years old as well as two adult women suggests that the household was not nuclear and may have included extended relatives or even unrelated Richmond blacks. A third deacon, a

³⁰ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters; the Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 145–48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 142–48.

shoemaker named Isham Ellis, had only one slave in his household, a woman over fifty-five years old, as well as several free black younger adults and children.

Deacons' own histories of enslavement, as well as the presence of extended families that included slaves, show the close ties that bound these relatively prosperous free deacons to the slave community of Richmond. An additional effect of the close ties between the deacons and slaves, however, was a reduction in wealth. As we saw in the case of Cary and Teague, buying family members out of slavery was often expensive and was likely to reduce the material standard of living and circumstances of free blacks who married slave women. Much of the rest of the wealth of these men might have been tied up in their homes. Cary owned a place, "below Richmond, that cost him \$1500, but will probably not sell for more than \$1000."³² The reduction in value might have been the result of real estate fluctuations in Richmond, but Cary's choice to make a risky investment in a home might indicate a desire for autonomy and independence. Certainly, most of the money Cary invested seems to have gone to securing his and his family's freedom and autonomy.

We possess limited information on most of the black men who were deacons of First Baptist, but there are two for whom we have more information. Lot Cary was probably born around 1780 in Charles City County about 30 miles southwest of Richmond.³³ He was born a slave. We know almost nothing definite about his early life. A memorial sketch of Cary written by Ralph Gurley, the Secretary of the American

³² Ibid.

³³ Ralph Randolph Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in "Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary."*: *Electronic Edition*. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 147. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gurley/gurley.html>. William Crane, in the letter to the Luminary cited above, described Cary and Collin Teague as "about forty years of age."

Colonization Society, quoted an unnamed person close to Cary who claimed that his parents were Christians and that his father was a “respected member of the Baptist Church.”³⁴ Cary was sent to Richmond in 1804, when our information about him becomes more reliable.³⁵ At the time, Richmond was a rapidly growing town. Richmond’s demand for labor, along with changing labor needs on Virginia plantations, made the hiring out of slaves to work in the city an attractive option for plantation owners like Cary’s owner. The costs of feeding and lodging slaves generally fell on the person hiring a slave, allowing the slave owner to both dispense with the cost of feeding a slave and to make a profit.³⁶

Gilbert Hunt, like Cary, was born around 1780 outside of Richmond in King William County, about 40 miles northeast of the city on the border between the Tidewater and Piedmont. Information on Hunt largely comes from an 1859 biography, written by a man named Phillip Barrett. Hunt’s master owned a tavern on the Pamunkey River and, according to Hunt “was a gentleman of considerable wealth.”³⁷ Hunt apparently came to Richmond with the daughter of his owner when she married a man living in the city. This man was a carriage maker and Hunt worked for him in the city. Most of the deacons of First Baptist Church about whom we have information were born

³⁴ Ibid. Pious parents are something of a hallmark of evangelical hagiography and Gurley’s source, whoever he is, had not talked to Cary in fifteen years and was presumably remembering Cary’s description of his own childhood fifty years ago.

³⁵ “Biography: The Rev. Lott Cary,” *The Latter Day Luminary* (1818-1825), December 1, 1825.

³⁶ Jonathan D Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁷ Philip Barrett, *Gilbert Hunt, The City Blacksmith: Electronic Edition*. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1820, 2000), 6, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/barrett/barrett.html>.

slightly later than Hunt and Cary, in the later 1780s and 90s.³⁸ We do not have any information on their birthplaces, although most likely, like Cary and Hunt, they were not born in Richmond. Few adult Richmond residents in the 1820s, white or black were born there, and most likely came from elsewhere in Virginia.

Lot Cary was hired out to the owners of the Shockoe Tobacco warehouse, described by Crane as the biggest such warehouse in the city. The warehouse was one of a number in the section of town known as Shockoe Bottom, an area on the banks of the James River, thriving on the tobacco trade.³⁹ For the next few years Cary was, according to his biography of 1825 in the *Latter Day Luminary*, “excessively profane, and much addicted to intoxication.”⁴⁰ While depravity before conversion was a standard trope of evangelical biography, there is no particular reason to doubt this account. Richmond was a rough, newly built inland port town. The leaders of Richmond worried a great deal about slaves like Cary who lived outside the supervision of their owners and mixed, promiscuously they thought, with the poor whites and free blacks also drawn to the town by work in the rapidly growing economy. James Sidbury illustrates white fears about this culture of drinking and racial mixing through grand jury reports complaining of slaves, whites, and free blacks drinking together and causing disturbances—or in the words of one presentation, “fiddling dancing, cursing, swearing, quarreling and fighting both day and night.”⁴¹ While the grand juries may have had their own reasons to see such

³⁸ Ancestry.com, US Census’ 1810, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850. Because the age ranges in the early censuses are often quite large, these are estimates based on the totality of the data.

³⁹ James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). I am indebted to Sidbury for much of this discussion of the culture of early Richmond.

⁴⁰ *Latter Day Luminary*, December 1, 1825.

⁴¹ Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*. The quote is from p. 175 and the discussion is drawn from pp. 168-74.

sociability in a negative light, a young Lot Cary would have certainly enjoyed plenty of opportunities for conduct that, after his conversion, he would view as sinful.

Cary came to the Shockoe warehouse as an unskilled slave laborer. It was hardly a position that should have allowed him much hope for advancement. However, Cary showed a talent for making himself indispensable. By 1819 William Crane described him as “chief manager among the labourers” in the Shockoe warehouse.⁴² He was not simply a foreman, however. Crane went on say that Cary was in “charge of receiving, marking and shipping tobacco.”⁴³ As both of the contemporary biographies of Cary pointed out, these jobs required literacy, and Cary was able to gain additional responsibilities as a result of his reading and writing skills.

Cary was converted in either 1806 or 1807 at First Baptist Church. Both Gurley’s biography and the one published in the *Latter Day Luminary* tie Cary’s literacy directly to his religious awakening, relating the story that Cary learned to read the bible after listening to a sermon about Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus in the gospel of John.⁴⁴ The sermon was an appropriate one for a recent evangelical convert, as Cary was. In the passage, Jesus tells Nicodemus: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Cary, like many converts before him, likely viewed this passage as directly describing his own salvation.

⁴² “Mission to Africa,” *The Latter Day Luminary* (1818-1825), May 2, 1819.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in “Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary.”: Electronic Edition.*, 147, “Biography,” *The Latter Day Luminary*, December 1, 1825.

Cary's competence and his literacy opened a pathway to his freedom. According to the *Luminary's* biography, "notwithstanding the hundreds of hogsheads that were committed to his charge, he could produce any one, the instant it was called for; and the shipments were made with a promptness and correctness, such as no person, white or black has equaled in the same situation."⁴⁵ He was given tobacco that had failed inspection to sell personally, as well as occasional tips from his employers, enabling him to save up money. He used this money, along with donations from the merchants with whom he worked, to buy his freedom and that of his two children for \$850 in 1813.⁴⁶ Cary's first wife had already died by this time. Cary continued to work in the warehouse where he had worked as a slave and by 1820 his annual salary had risen to \$800. In a letter of recommendation forwarded by Benjamin Brand, Cary's partner and patron, to a merchant, tobacco merchants who had worked with Cary in Richmond described him as "worthy of trust" and "an honest dependable man."⁴⁷

Cary also rapidly increased his responsibilities in the Baptist church. The records for the First Baptist Church are lost for this period, so we do not know when Cary started preaching, although according to the *Luminary*, he began shortly after his conversion.⁴⁸ Cary was evidently a talented preacher. Gurley quoted a "correspondent" who reported,

that in preaching, notwithstanding his grammatical inaccuracies, he was often truly eloquent. He had derived almost nothing from the schools, and his manner was of course unpolished, but his ideas would sometimes burst upon you in their

⁴⁵ "Biography," December 1, 1825.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Brand to Joseph King and Thomas Tyson, Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁴⁸ "Biography," December 1, 1825. Crane claims Cary had been preaching for about ten year in 1819, but the *Luminary's* account was earlier and more detailed on this question.

native solemnity, and awaken deeper feelings than the most polished, but less original and inartificial [sic] discourse⁴⁹

As well as preaching to slaves in the city, according to Gurley, Cary also preached on outlying plantations.

Following his time working as a carriage maker, Gilbert Hunt was sold to a tradesman. Presumably, the skills he had acquired made him far more valuable than he would have been as an unskilled laborer. Hunt worked at this man's shop until his death when he was sold again to a blacksmith, who likely trained him in the craft. Hunt's biography does not mention when, or how, he became a free man. The biography is clear that he was still enslaved during the war of 1812, when a British fleet menaced Richmond. Hunt told his biographer that when his master fled the city fearing an imminent attack, he was left in charge of the forge, which continued to produce guns and other military supplies at a feverish rate. He certainly was free by 1829 when he left for Liberia in the *Harriet* and had probably been free for a number of years at the time.⁵⁰ No records survive detailing Hunt's conversion. He was a member of First Baptist Church by 1824.

First Baptist Deacons and Liberian Colonization

Understanding the origins of black deacons in the First Baptist Church helps us understand why whites chose them for the role, but gives us limited insight into their own

⁴⁹ Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in "Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary."*: Electronic Edition., 148.

⁵⁰ Hunt does not appear in the 1820 census, which is not conclusive either way. By 1825 when he first appears in the records of First Baptist he was probably free, although the loss of the earlier records does not allow me to be certain of this.

motivations. However, the heavy participation of deacons from First Baptist Church in the colonization of Liberia gives us a much better view into their approach to intermediation and how they saw themselves in relationship to free blacks, slaves, and whites. In 1819, Collin Teague and Lot Cary left for Africa under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. In the following years, three more men who had been deacons of First Baptist Church left for Liberia. Another free black man who was a deacon at Second Baptist Church in Richmond also made the journey. A further nine free black members of First Baptist Church, who were not deacons, went as well. While most black deacons and free black members never went to Africa, the level of emigration among black deacons is striking.⁵¹

Cary and Teague appear to have jointly decided to emigrate. While the American Colonization Society had been formed only in 1816, according to Ralph Gurley's account Cary's interest in colonization preceded this establishment. Gurley claimed that Cary had "begun to feel a special interest in the cause of African Missions" by 1815 "and contributed probably more than any other person, in giving origin and character to the African Missionary Society established during that year in Richmond."⁵² A letter from

⁵¹ For an overview of the colonization movement see Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution a History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005). For the only extensive work looking at Richmond free blacks and colonization see Marie Tyler McGraw, "Richmond Free Blacks and African Colonization, 1816-1832," *Journal of American Studies* 21, no. 2 (August 1, 1987): 207-224, and Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). As part of an account of the involvement of American free blacks in the Colonization movement, James Sidbury's, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) also examines Cary's career.

⁵² Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in "Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary."*: Electronic Edition., 148.

Crane confirms Gurley's account, and suggests that Cary and Teague founded the colonization society in Richmond.⁵³

It was unsurprising that interest in colonization in Virginia predated the formation of the American Colonization Society. The colonization movement had origins on both sides of the Atlantic. Paul Cuffee, a free black American-British ship captain, had provided both an ideological argument and material support for the emigration of a few northern free blacks to Sierra Leone, itself a joint project of British free blacks and American slaves who had escaped during the Revolutionary War. Cuffee, in particular, may well have been a strong influence on Cary. Cuffee envisioned a commercial empire linking the African diaspora to the home country. Through commerce, he believed the conversion of Africans to Christianity could be achieved. He believed that Africa could offer opportunities for blacks in America that they could not receive at home.⁵⁴

The American Colonization Society chose to organize separately from the nascent colonization societies that Cuffee established and inspired; a decision that limited the appeal of the ACS to many American blacks, who came to see the aim of the society as forced deportation. Nonetheless, initially there was substantial enthusiasm among free blacks for the Liberia colony.⁵⁵ The first attempt to settle Liberia failed due to a poor choice of site, and the colonists were forced to seek refuge in Sierra Leone. Therefore when Cary arrived in Africa, it was not in Liberia, but in Sierra Leone. He stayed for

⁵³ "Mission to Africa," *The Latter Day Luminary*.

⁵⁴ Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 184. My discussion and understanding of transatlantic black emigration to Africa is drawn from Sidbury.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

almost a year before the ACS was able to locate and buy a new site, literally at gunpoint, from a local leader.⁵⁶

Once in Liberia, Cary seems to have quickly made himself indispensable. Unsurprisingly, given the circumstances of the purchase, the colony faced strong hostility from its neighbors. Added to these problems was the exceptionally high mortality rate of the settlers. Others, such as Collin Teague, left the colony. Things were dire enough that the enterprise was nearly abandoned. Cary apparently persuaded many free blacks not to decamp back to Sierra Leone.⁵⁷ He also operated as the doctor for the colony, since doctors brought there invariably either left or died. In addition to that role, his preaching responsibilities, and his efforts to convert Africans, Cary also took on increasing leadership responsibilities. Most contemporary sources credit him with leadership in defending the colony from an attack launched by local Africans. Largely through Cary's leadership, the colony was able to survive through its worst years and achieve a certain amount of stability over the course of the 1820s. In 1828, when Jehudi Ashmun, the white ACS Agent who was responsible for the colony, left Africa in an attempt to recover from sickness, he left Cary in charge. Cary governed the colony for most of the remaining part of the year. In November, while preparing for an expedition against Africans involved in slave trading, Cary was killed in an accidental explosion while making cartridges.

Although the knowledge of his death had not yet reached America, Cary was already dead by the time ten members of the First Baptist Church, including Gilbert Hunt and another deacon, Alex Henderson, left Norfolk, Virginia, onboard the *Harriet*, bound

⁵⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁷ "Biography," *Latter Day Luminary*, December 1, 1825.

for Liberia. The *Harriet* sailed in the winter of 1829 and arrived in Liberia about a month later. The First Baptist Church members on board had received letters of dismissal from the church in January.⁵⁸ No information survives on the motivations of these later groups of settlers. Cary had been putting a great deal of effort into attracting free black emigrants from America, and it seems likely that to some extent the colonists were motivated by his example. Cary had planned to come back to America to encourage emigration before he decided that the colony's needs required him to stay, and he continued to encourage emigration from afar. Cary planned to make a trip back to Virginia to speak on behalf of colonization, but the trip was delayed by the circumstances of the colony and never realized.⁵⁹

Cary believed strongly in his talents, and with good reason. He was a man who had arrived in Richmond an illiterate unskilled slave and had risen to a position of large responsibilities and established himself as a respected community leader. He was, however, equally convinced that racial prejudice would never allow him to fulfill those talents in America. In this sense, Cary was vindicated. While the ACS nominally ruled Liberia, Cary's abilities, intellect, and leadership ability were too much in evidence to be ignored in a situation in which they were badly needed. Cary was forced, however, to grapple with a fundamental tension in his relationship with the ACS. Cary had risen to his positions in the church and in the tobacco business in Richmond by not only by his talents but also through impressing upon whites, both that he possessed those talents, and that he would prove extremely useful to them, rather than pose a threat.

⁵⁸ VBHS, First Baptist Church, January 1821.

⁵⁹ See Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary* in "*Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary.*: Electronic Edition, 151-3.

For Cary to obtain this status, he had been required to conduct a difficult balancing act. Free blacks were, in the eyes of almost all Richmond whites, both inherently suspect and inherently inferior in intellect and industry. Cary had been successful at navigating between both views, but had abandoned America to escape the limitations that accompanied doing so. While he was successful in escaping, he continued to need the support and patronage of whites within the ACS in order to achieve his goals of encouraging the immigration of free blacks. Cary's biographies and writings provide us a remarkably well-documented view of the attitudes and ideology of a man who was a deacon in the First Baptist Church. In the biography which appeared in the *Latter Day Luminary*, after praising Cary's attributes, the writer mentioned that "he will probably never be able to divest himself of a kind of suspicious reserve, toward white people—especially his superiors—which universally attaches itself to those reared in slavery."⁶⁰ Even though the underlying assumption of the quotation is open to question, the biography's discussion of Cary's "suspicious reserve" in his dealings with whites fits with Cary's relationship to the ACS in Liberia.

The direct representative of the ACS in Liberia was Jehudi Ashmun, a white colonial agent. Cary and Ashmun clashed early on. Ashmun arrived at Cape Mensundo in 1822. Ashmun, a minister, had not come to Africa as agent of the colony—he came there in the hope that he could realize lucrative trading profits and thereby clear his substantial debts in America. Once in Liberia, Ashmun discovered that there was no colonial representative and he was eventually appointed by the society to this position. The previous agent, Dr. Ayers, arrived back in the colony in May of 1823, but left, sick, in

⁶⁰ "Biography," December 1, 1825.

December. Ashmun himself was constantly sick with fever and was only with difficulty able to command the defense of the colony against attacks.

The conflict and eventual partnership between Cary and Ashmun reveals a great deal about Cary's relationships with whites in general. Shortly after Ayers's departure, a dispute erupted that pitted Cary and other settlers against Ashmun. The proximate cause of the mutiny seems to have involved the amount of communal labor settlers owed to the colonial government. At root, the dispute involved Ashmun's style of leadership and the colonists' belief that they had a right to have a role in decisions. There may also have been commercial considerations at play. Ashmun had come to Liberia under the aegis of Baltimore merchants who posed a threat to Cary's own mercantile interests.⁶¹ Ashmun denied rations to some colonists who he believed were failing to provide their communal labor to the colony. This action provoked a mutiny. A group of colonists, led by Cary, seized the colony's rations by force. Ashmun responded with calls for unity and threats to inform the colonial government of the mutiny.

Ashmun recounted the incident: at this point, Cary "came forward and deplored the part he had taken." Ashmun wrote that Cary "felt that he had inflicted on his character, usefulness, and peace, a wound that could not in this world be healed, and betrayed the great confidence reposed in him by his pious employers and patrons at home."⁶² Cary was able to convince Ashmun that he was repentant for his role in the mutiny, but we have no evidence that this reflected his own views—he might have simply decided that his point was made and that further conflict with Ashmun would do

⁶¹ Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 187.

⁶² Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in "Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary."*: Electronic Edition., 150.

little good. Cary's ability to pivot from a determined opponent of Ashmun to an ally shows his ability to convince whites in positions of authority of his usefulness to them. The settlement of the dispute was probably more complicated than Ashmun admitted at the time or Gurley was later prepared to admit. Immediately afterwards Cary, at his own request, was put in charge of slaves liberated from trading vessels.

The relationship between Cary and Ashmun continued to be fractious and Ashmun continued to complain of his treatment by the colonists. However, with the personal visit of Ralph Gurley to the colony and the introduction of a new constitution for the colony, an accord was worked out.⁶³ The requirement for communal labor seems to have been quietly dropped. Furthermore, Cary seems to have been given a larger role in decision-making. Upon his visit, Gurley noted "He entered most cordially into the views of the Agents in regard to the establishment of a new form of Government. He readily comprehended the principles upon which it was organized, and entirely approved them."⁶⁴

This evidence strongly suggests that Cary and Ashmun had reached some sort of informal understanding. Cary would not again challenge Ashmun's authority, but Ashmun, for his part, involved Cary in the government of the colony. When Ashmun informed the colony of the mutiny, he mentioned Cary's part in it but added "the services rendered by Lot Cary in the Colony...entitle his agency in this affair, to the most indulgent construction which it will bear. The hand which records the lawless transaction, would long since have been cold in the grave, had it not been for the unwearied and

⁶³ Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 188–9.

⁶⁴ Gurley, *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary in "Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from His Journal and Other Writings; With a Brief Sketch of the Life of The Rev. Lott Cary."*: Electronic Edition., 150.

painful attentions of this individual—rendered at all hours--of every description--and continued for several months.”⁶⁵

The conflict between Ashmun and Cary and its eventual resolution demonstrates both Cary’s determination to secure autonomy and authority for himself, but also his pragmatism. Ashmun was convinced both of the political value and the utility of giving Cary leadership responsibilities. For his part, Cary probably calculated that sedition risked his, and the colony’s, access to the resources of the ACS. Cary and Ashmun seem to have successfully formed a workable partnership, since there were not more reports of trouble. Cary was elected Vice Agent of the colony in 1826.⁶⁶ When Ashmun left Liberia in Cary’s charge in 1828, hoping to recover in America from the illness that would soon kill him, Cary wrote in his journal “He is indeed dear to this people, and it will be a joyful day when we are again permitted to see him.”⁶⁷ In turn, Ashmun encouraged the trustees of the ACS to appoint Cary as the permanent agent of the colony.⁶⁸ The struggles over the control of the colony show that while Cary was distrustful of white authority, he was, as he had shown in Richmond, adroit at working with whites.

Cary maintained links to white Richmonders while in Liberia, keeping up correspondence with a variety of white figures from Richmond. The secretary of the Richmond Colonization Society, Benjamin Brand, was also Cary’s business partner in various trading ventures to Africa. Brand was a Richmond businessman involved in several mercantile and industrial ventures. Brand sent tobacco for Cary to trade and Cary attempted to find a cash crop for Liberia, although Brand reported that the coffee from

⁶⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 159.

Liberia did not suit the tastes of Americans. Cary was, in addition to Brand's business partner, his primary link to the ACS.

A long letter Cary wrote to Brand in late 1820s gives us insight into Cary's views on the position of blacks in America, as well as his own relationship with whites.

Although Cary did not directly write about his relationship with the First Baptist Church of Richmond, his attitudes towards his position in America before his emigration to Liberia reveal a great deal about how he viewed his relationship with the church. By the early 1830s, the colonization movement had been largely discredited in most free black communities in the North and South, but for a period in the 1820s there was a vigorous debate about the merits of colonization. After being sent a copy of a resolution adopted by Philadelphia free blacks, Cary sent his response, along with instructions to Benjamin Brand to publish it only if he believed it would be helpful to the colonization movement. Brand decided that it would not, and it was never published. It is easy to see why Brand did not believe Cary's letter would be particularly helpful. Cary attacked both the free blacks of Philadelphia for opposing emigration to Liberia, but also free blacks in Baltimore and elsewhere who supported the society but did not themselves emigrate. Cary told them "you will never know whether you are men or monkeys as long as you remain in America, for both you and they use so much more sagacity than could be anticipated, considering the circumstances under which you have been brought up."⁶⁹

Cary did not display a particular talent for politics in insulting the Colonization Society's supporters, but he did reveal how strongly he believed in the impossibility of blacks leading dignified lives in the United States. Again addressing free blacks in

⁶⁹ Lot Cary to Benjamin Brand, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

America, he told them "I shall believe you to be men when I see you conducting the affairs of your own government; and not before, but so long as you are in your present state of subservience; we cannot view you as on a level with us."⁷⁰ Cary believed that racial prejudice made it impossible for blacks in America to be anything but subservient. This inferiority, according to Cary, was tied to their basic condition in America; they had lost their freedom "on that same day that their ancestors were taken captives and conveyed into America and made slaves among a strange people." Therefore, their rights as men" consequently cannot be enjoyed by them while in a state of captivity. And therefore when they speak of the rights of man, they speak of what they have only heard, or seen, enjoyed by other people."⁷¹

The cause of this inequality, Cary believed, was racial prejudice. Cary saw prejudice as an immutable condition stemming from the origin of blacks in America. Again addressing Philadelphia free blacks who believed racial prejudice in America could be removed, Cary told them: "you can only hope for the removal of that prejudice upon two principals, [sic] that is you must either become white men, or you must leave the country." He continued, "Therefore it appears to me that as long as you tread upon American soils; with the complexion that you now have—you may expect those prejudices to continue if that is the cause." Cary told free blacks that they would always be looked on with contempt in America "if it is because you are viewed in a state of captivity if you refused to be restored it will still encrease that prejudice."⁷² Cary was telling free blacks that they could never be truly free in America, the taint of slavery would always follow

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

them. Whites who saw them remain in America and accept prejudice would assume they accepted that they were, in fact, inferior to whites. Only through returning to the land their ancestors had lived in as free people could American blacks gain respect. Cary wrote, “As to your waiting for some great change, it is idleness in you, as long as Africa remains unpeopled by any other nation. You may know that she is waiting for her rightful sons and here you and your children must and shall come.”⁷³

Cary, however, continued to rely on white patrons in Liberia. Alongside the call for blacks to take control of their own destiny, was his declaration of support for the ACS. In the beginning of the letter, Cary denied that he had been forced to leave Richmond, writing “I do not consider that I was sent away but came with my own free consent through the kind and benevolent aid of the good colonization society.”⁷⁴ Cary was fully aware that he was attempting to pursue a dream of black independence in Africa through a white-run and organized association. Given his complicated history with Ashmun, Cary could hardly have been unaware of the compromises this required.

It is hard not to see Cary’s success during his career in Liberia in light of the relationship between the black deacons and the white members of the First Baptist Church. Cary and other black deacons in Richmond were connected with the wider currents of thought in the African diaspora, but were also intensely hemmed in by the slave system that surrounded them. The interaction between ambition and opportunity forced deacons to make numerous compromises, but we should not understand their actions as simple subservience to a system of slavery and racial hierarchy. Cary understood the benefits of working within a white-run system as much as he chafed at it,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

because it allowed him a greater range of action than would have been possible without the resources of the ACS. This attitude helps us to understand his view of his role as a preacher and deacon in the First Baptist Church in Richmond. Cary came to hate the compromises he had to make in America, which were far more extensive than those he ever had to make in Liberia. Of Richmond free blacks he wrote, “they keep hid in the bush, waiting to find out what the world is doing. They say but little and less if it is possible.” The quote reveals a great deal about how Cary saw his position in Richmond and that of his fellow free blacks and deacons. He portrayed Richmond free blacks as extremely cautious. This caution was justifiable, he implied.

To some extent, Cary’s views of free blacks in Richmond can help us make sense of the actions of deacons in the First Baptist Church. Although the black deacons do seem to have attempted to establish their meetings as a parallel disciplinary system, they were careful not to provoke any direct confrontation with whites and when their efforts resulted in white concern, they were careful to paint the incident as a misunderstanding, much as Cary had done after his confrontation with Ashmun. Cary understood that free blacks in Richmond were precariously holding on to freedom and unwilling to take risks that might endanger that freedom, writing that “truly they are satisfied at present with the name of freeman, without knowing how a freeman feels.”⁷⁵ But Cary did not mean to imply that Richmond free blacks were content with this system or unengaged with the free black world outside of Richmond. Cary wrote of Richmond free blacks, “I think they will make the best citizens if there should ever be earthquakes and revolutions in nature sufficient to awake them.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Cary mentioned Richmond's free blacks to castigate those from Philadelphia and Baltimore, but he was also clearly reflecting on his life and career as a free man in Richmond. Cary had been a prominent black member of First Baptist Church, allowed to preach and to act as a deacon. Yet he implied that he believed himself forced to be cautious. This caution is evident in the care with which Cary cultivated patronage from connected white Richmonders. Cary knew that without their patronage and the protection it provided him, his efforts at preaching and organizing free blacks in colonization societies would be dangerous—as his comment about Richmond blacks “saying but little and less if possible” indicates. This is not to imply that Cary's connection to First Baptist Church was solely instrumental. Cary was converted within the church and that conversion fundamentally shaped the rest of his life. However, Cary chose to work within biracial churches because he had few other options to pursue his project of Christian ministry and eventual colonization. He was likely never content with the constraints he was forced to operate under in the biracial First Baptist Church.

Although at least three other black deacons followed Cary and Teague to Liberia, most black deacons, like most free blacks in the United States, did not go to Liberia. To some extent, these decisions may have been practical. The Liberian colony was plagued by disease and life for the early colonists was difficult. However, it is also likely that like most free blacks in the United States, most deacons of First Baptist Church did not believe that Africa was the only place American blacks could have a dignified future. Instead, they probably agreed with Frederick Douglass, and many other free blacks, that they were Americans and that a better future must be obtained in America. Cary had an ambivalent relationship with whites. He was adept at working with them but came to

reject the biracialism of the First Baptist Church. Although many of the rest of the black deacons likely had similar ambivalent relationships with whites, they chose not to reject biracialism as Cary did. They may have chosen to continue living in Virginia and pursuing the goal of working for black Christianity in Virginia for reasons of expediency and practicality, but we should also not ignore the possibility that they may have been faithful to biracialism because they believed in a Christianity that could unite Virginians, both white and black.

Cary is not a representative case, but he is illustrative. Through him we can see the range of views open to black deacons. Perhaps most importantly, Cary reveals the connections between free black Richmonders and free blacks throughout the United States and the Atlantic World.

Gilbert Hunt left for Africa along with Alex Henderson, entrusted with a letter from Brand to Cary, but they arrived to find Cary dead.⁷⁶ Henderson would stay in Liberia. In an 1843 census of Liberia, he was living in Monrovia and his occupation was listed as a trader. Hunt, on the other hand, only stayed in Liberia for a year, leaving along with Ned Lewis, another member of First Baptist Church. Hunt's biographer glossed over Hunt's reasons for departing Liberia, but he evidently was dissatisfied with what he found there. Conditions in the colony remained dire, and disease continued to be a devastating problem. Hunt's time in Liberia and his return were both controversial among the Liberian colonists and their American backers. In a letter to Brand, another emigrant complained that "I have no doubt that Gilbert Hunt has prevented any emigration from Richmond and Petersburg in the *Montgomery*, [a ship that sailed from Virginia to

⁷⁶ Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society, January 24, 1829.

Liberia] hence I know he does not intend to return and am quite sorry he was permitted under any circumstances to go back.”⁷⁷ Brand wrote back that he believed twenty-two emigrants who were planning to go to Liberia had been dissuaded “in consequence of the many evil and false reports in circulation here about the colony. The most of these reports, I believe came originally from Gilbert Hunt.” In the First Baptist Church, Hunt’s return also attracted unfavorable notice, with the minutes recording that Hunt had “returned from Africa” and there were “reports having circulated derogatory to his character.”⁷⁸ The case might have partly involved comments Hunt had made about Liberia.

Hunt, for his part, seems to have disclaimed responsibility for the bad publicity Liberia had received. Bland wrote that Hunt “now says that letters from the colony contain many unfavorable accts which he has endeavored to keep secret.”⁷⁹ At any event, Hunt was cleared of the charges and accepted back into the church.⁸⁰ Several years later he was charged with adultery, but those charges were also dismissed.⁸¹ Hunt would remain a member of the church.

Hunt was not the only emigrant to Liberia who found conditions far from ideal. Earlier emigrants too had reported on conditions that failed to meet their expectations.⁸² Liberia was a killing ground for early settlers who died by the scores. For many free blacks emigrants, such as Hunt, Liberia was a bitter disappointment. The Liberia project would prove a disappointment to the colonization society as well, and it would never

⁷⁷ Ibid., Joseph Shepherd to Benjamin Brand.

⁷⁸ VBHS, First Baptist Church of Richmond, Jan 21, 1830.

⁷⁹ Benjamin Brand To Joseph Shepherd, Benjamin Brand Papers, October 12, 1830.

⁸⁰ Ibid., February 4, 1830.

⁸¹ Ibid. November 3, 1833, February 11, 1834.

⁸² Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 194–5.

attract free blacks in the numbers that Cary envisioned. In fact, the last large wave of free black emigrants to Liberia From Virginia came in 1831, fleeing the reprisals following Nat Turner's Revolt.

Later emigrants were almost entirely slaves who came to Liberia as a condition of their freedom. Colonization became anathema in free black communities. Reports, such as Hunt's, that filtered back to America did not help. More important was a shift in black thought in America away from Cary's pessimistic perspective, which saw Africa as the only hope for free blacks, into an America-centered vision in which blacks embraced an ideal of racial equality.⁸³ Cary was a figure who was forged in a particular Richmond and Virginia Baptist tradition. The peculiar mix of accommodation and resistance he embodied was informed, if not wholly created, by his career as a black deacon in the First Baptist Church.

First Baptist Church would eventually separate itself both physically and organizationally from its black members, leaving its building to the newly formed First African Church in 1841. The First African Church was composed of all of the black members of the First Baptist Church. This church carried the logic of autonomy for black deacons a step further by creating a white superstructure with a board of supervisors and a white minister, Robert Ryland, to govern an entirely black church.⁸⁴ This structure was less a radical departure from past practice than a full implementation of a creeping trend. Despite the structure of white control, the earlier history of First Baptist Church suggests the First African Church was likely still largely governed by the black deacons. The balancing act that these black deacons had to perform would have been familiar to earlier

⁸³ Ibid., 196–202.

⁸⁴ Robert Ryland, *Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, by the Pastor. Irons, The Origins of Proslavery Christianity.*

deacons. While much had changed outwardly, many of the same dynamics of intermediation continued.

Cary had hoped to solve the problem of his intermediary role by leaving the country. In some ways, this departure was as thorough a rejection of the biracial church as that of Frederick Douglass. While Cary, unlike Douglass, never explicitly rejected the project of biracial Christianity, he did reject biracialism as a whole. Cary's rejection of the biracial church allows us a unique window into his ideas and experiences as a free black deacon. Cary lets us see both the possibilities created by biracial Christianity, but also its ultimate limitations within a slave society.

CONCLUSION

On March 18, 1834, the clerk at First Baptist Church in Richmond recorded that “Pleasant and Fanny servants of Colin Clarke were on motion by Bro Coffing excluded for the sin of adultery, on the evidence of William, a servant of the said Clarke.”¹ This short entry tells us a great deal about biracial Christianity among Baptists in Virginia. First, it highlights the difficulties inherent in discerning the motivations of slaves in biracial Baptist churches from church records. It is not clear from the entry whether Pleasant and Fanny were married to each other and both committed adultery, or if they were married to others and committed adultery with each other. There had been no previous mention of an investigation. It would appear from the summary that the case was begun not by Coffing, a white member, but by William, a slave. Coffing was likely simply relaying information from William, about whose story we know little. Perhaps he was attempting to curry favor with members of the church, or with Coffing. He also could have had a complaint of his own against Pleasant and Fanny, although the church minutes would likely have mentioned it if he had been Fanny’s husband. William may have simply been acting on his belief in the immorality of adultery. Baptist slaves in other places reported fellow slaves for adultery more frequently than they did for other violations. We cannot know William’s intentions, which may have been a complex mixture of these possibilities.

Despite these limitations, the case clearly demonstrates the need to see biracial Christianity as shaped by black members as well as whites. While we know little of the

¹Virginia Baptist Historical Society. First Baptist Church of Richmond, March 18, 1834.

details of William's case, his actions mirror the decisions of thousands of slaves in Virginia who participated in biracial Baptist churches in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War. William first chose to be a church member, and then chose to report the case of adultery involving two fellow slaves to the church. In so doing he was involved in a series of conflicts about the meaning of Baptist faith to slaves.

We know far more about slaves who rejected biracial Christianity. The first and last chapters highlighted two such cases, each of which features a dramatic rejection. Frederick Douglass rejected biracial Christianity directly, seeing any form of Christianity that upheld slavery as a twisted abomination. Lot Cary's rejection was subtler. While in Liberia, Cary maintained his connections with the biracial First Baptist Church in Richmond. However, he rejected the entire project of biracialism, arguing that blacks could never be free of prejudice in America. There is a certain irony to beginning and ending with chapters that prominently feature dissenters in a larger work that argues for the importance of understanding the role of biracial Christianity. In their dissent, however, both Douglass and Cary give us an important window into how slaves and free blacks who belonged to biracial evangelical churches understood their decision to do so, and what this decision meant for their lives.

Rejections of biracial Christianity have to be understood in the context of the decision by many slaves to accept the institution and the attempt of these slaves to determine the meaning of this acceptance within Virginia slave communities. The critics of biracial Christianity offer valuable insights, but only if we are able to understand the power and appeal of the institution they attacked. As chapters two and three suggested, Baptist churches were an overlay on existing communities, but were not identical with

these communities. They often drew together non-slaveowning whites and slaves into a single church community. The attraction of these communities to many slaves, as well as whites, was that they were built on a foundation of faith and mutual community, both in their world and in the hereafter. These were not ideal communities, as slaves within them well knew, but by focusing solely on the inequalities and betrayals of spiritual equality in biracial churches, we risk being blind to their appeal.

Cary and Douglass also give us a window into options available to slaves within churches. Their stories suggest the possibilities for quiet dissent by slaves and free blacks within biracial churches. The idea of the “invisible church” has led historians to look for resistance to pro-slavery Christianity outside of the church, but slaves who joined biracial churches did not simply have to buy into notions of racial inferiority or the biblical justification of slavery. Slaves were able, within the church, to believe a variety of things about what they heard in sermons. As I argued in chapter three, slaves selectively rejected and embraced aspects of evangelical morality; slaves reported other slaves for offenses such as drinking, gambling, or violence, but I found no examples of slaves reporting other slaves for running away or stealing from owners. This suggests that black Baptists in biracial churches developed a complicated sense of evangelical morality that shared much, but not all, in common with the code of white Baptists in these churches.

Most slaves, like most whites, did not belong to any church. Their reasons for not joining were probably various. Some, who attended churches but chose not to join, may not have believed themselves truly converted. Others, perhaps, believed in some tenets of Christianity, but felt church membership was an unnecessary step. There were many others, however, who were neither members nor regular attenders of any church. Some

were probably simply not believers in Christianity, or practiced various forms of syncretic religion. Others may have considered themselves Christian, but rejected white dominated biracial churches and their demands that slaves conform to a rigid evangelical moral code, as well as the selective and racially-biased enforcement of that code. These slaves practiced Christianity outside of established churches. The rejection of biracial Christianity was always an option, and it took forms beyond those chosen by Douglass and Cary. The possibility of this rejection is vital in understanding the impact of biracial Christianity. In Virginia, slaves, like whites, knew many people who were not church members, or church attenders. They also likely knew many who were not Christians at all, but followed different sets of beliefs. Rather than speaking to the weakness of biracial Christianity, this possibility of rejection helps us understand the spiritual world of slave communities. This world contained a great deal of diversity. Slaves who joined biracial Baptist churches had other readily available spiritual options, yet chose to join these churches and it is in this context that we have to understand their faith.

This dissertation looks at a period when the religious and social worlds of Virginia slaves were in rapid flux. The era from the end of the Revolutionary War to the Civil War was one of widespread conversion of slaves to evangelical forms of Christianity in Virginia and throughout the South. Individual decisions of slaves involving biracial Christianity have to be understood in the context of the widespread societal changes in Virginia that caused and accompanied this wave of conversions. While historians have emphasized the disruption caused by conversion when dealing with whites, the historiography of this period has not generally treated this period as one of

tumult and disruption within the slave community.² Before the Revolution, most whites in Virginia were unchurched, and levels of devotion varied, but the vast majority broadly subscribed to Christianity. The same was not true of black Virginians, few of whom were familiar with Christianity before the American Revolution. While exact numbers are difficult to determine, Christianity was firmly established in black Virginia communities by the time of the Civil War.

Understanding the changes caused by evangelicalism in the family lives of slaves requires us to be willing to see slave communities in flux. Black Christianity was largely created in the nineteenth century, and it was not created in isolation. Slaves and free blacks navigated contacts with whites in biracial churches, reacted to versions of Christianity preached by whites in biracial churches, and experienced the collisions between evangelical Christianity as it was preached and practiced in churches and the slave community more broadly.

Although an increasing number of Virginia slaves in the period from the Revolution to the Civil War would have described themselves as Christians, the meaning of Christianity was also vigorously contested. Chapters two and three presented evidence of disputes among slaves about the meaning of Christianity. These disputes, I argue, were the result of widespread conversion and the conflicts it engendered between not only Christian and non-Christian slaves, but also between slaves who considered themselves Christians, both in and outside of biracial churches. Conflict, of course, was not the only result of conversion. The evidence suggests that slaves joined biracial churches for many of the same reasons that whites did. These churches provided alternative communities

² See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998), Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

with values different from that of the wider Virginia society. They allowed slaves to interact with each other and whites in ways not normally allowed within Virginia slave society.

Understanding the appeal of biracial Baptist communities to slaves also requires us to see the biracial nature of the churches as part of their appeal, and to see slave communities as inextricably bound up with white communities. Biracial Christianity was embedded within slave society, a fact that is evident in the clumsy preaching to slaves on the duties of obedience that Douglass so effectively mocked, and also in the ways in which the spiritual equality the churches proclaimed was undermined by unequal treatment of slaves and free blacks within churches. Nonetheless, Baptist biracial churches were a collaborative enterprise. Biracial Christianity cannot simply be understood as something created by whites to control slaves, although white Baptists certainly made efforts to use it for these purposes. The nature of evangelical Christianity made it impossible for white Baptists to compel membership from slaves. Black Baptists' participation in biracial Christianity was essential to its existence. Slaves participated because of the spiritual value of community, of course, but also because of what this spiritual community could mean within their local communities.

Slaves used Baptist church discipline as a method to settle quarrels and police slave communities. Marriage became a particularly contested point because evangelical ideas of marriage clashed with different norms common in slave communities. Slaves who attempted to enforce evangelical marriage norms on other slave members likely had multiple motivations, including their belief in the biblical basis of indissoluble marriages. One of the effects of these efforts to enforce monogamy, and probably an intended one,

was to force the issue of the morality of the breakup of slave marriages and families through sale into the disciplinary proceedings of Baptist churches.

Slaves were, as Charles Irons has shown, partially successful—if we measure this success by their ability to influence white Baptist church leaders to consider the problem of slave marriages.³ White church leaders were troubled by the lack of statutory legal protection for slave marriage, but did not, until the Civil War, make concerted attempts to change these laws. On the local level, the results were much the same. Slaves were able to confront white church members with the incompatibility of southern law with Baptist ideas of marriage, but they were not able to get white church members to condemn the sale of slaves. Confronting white Baptists with the injustice of slave sale may not have been the only purpose of slaves pushing for evangelical views of marriage. The efforts of these slaves may also have been motivated by beliefs about stability in slave family life, particularly when familial stability was threatened by the potential of sale and separation.

This dissertation has suggested that historians need to further consider biracial slave churches as sites of community and conflict, rather than solely coercion and repression. I have argued here that we need to understand slaves' interaction with these churches as inherently complex and based not on coercion or false preaching but on social and religious principles. The religion that slaves created in biracial churches in Virginia was vital in the formation of a distinctive black Christianity that became the foundation of black life in America before and after the Civil War.

³ See Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008), 84–6 and 240.

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First Baptist Church of Richmond, 1825-1837
Four Mile Creek Baptist Church, 1825-1831
Metherrin Baptist Church, 1772-1818
Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1774-1800
Second Baptist Church of Richmond, 1821-1841
South Quay Baptist Church, 1778-1831
Tomahawk Baptist Church, 1792-1808

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"Unequal Fellowship: White and Black Baptists in Wilkes County, Georgia," Presentation to the American Seminar of the Johns Hopkins University, April 2006

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